IS Volume7

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 7

Okiura

Infinite Stratos 7

Izuru Yumizuru

いつもと違う雰囲気にドキドキ……

「戦う……この『打鉄弐式』で……！」

すれ違うふたり……

更識の名を持つ姉と妹――

キャラクター紹介

織斑一夏（おりむらいちか）

「世界で唯一ISを動かせる男子」。
専用IS【白式】。

篠ノ之箒（しののののほうき）

一夏の幼なじみ。
専用IS【紅椿】。

セシリア・オルコット

イギリス代表候補生。
専用IS【ブルー・ティアーズ】。

鳳鈴音（ファン・リンイン）

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専用IS【甲龍】。

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フランス代表候補生。
専用IS【R-リヴァイヴ・カスタムII】。

ラウラ・ボーデヴィッヒ

ドイツ代表候補生。
専用IS【シュヴァルツェア・レーゲン】。

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口絵・本文イラスト● okiura

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IS
〈インフィニット・ストラトス〉
⑦

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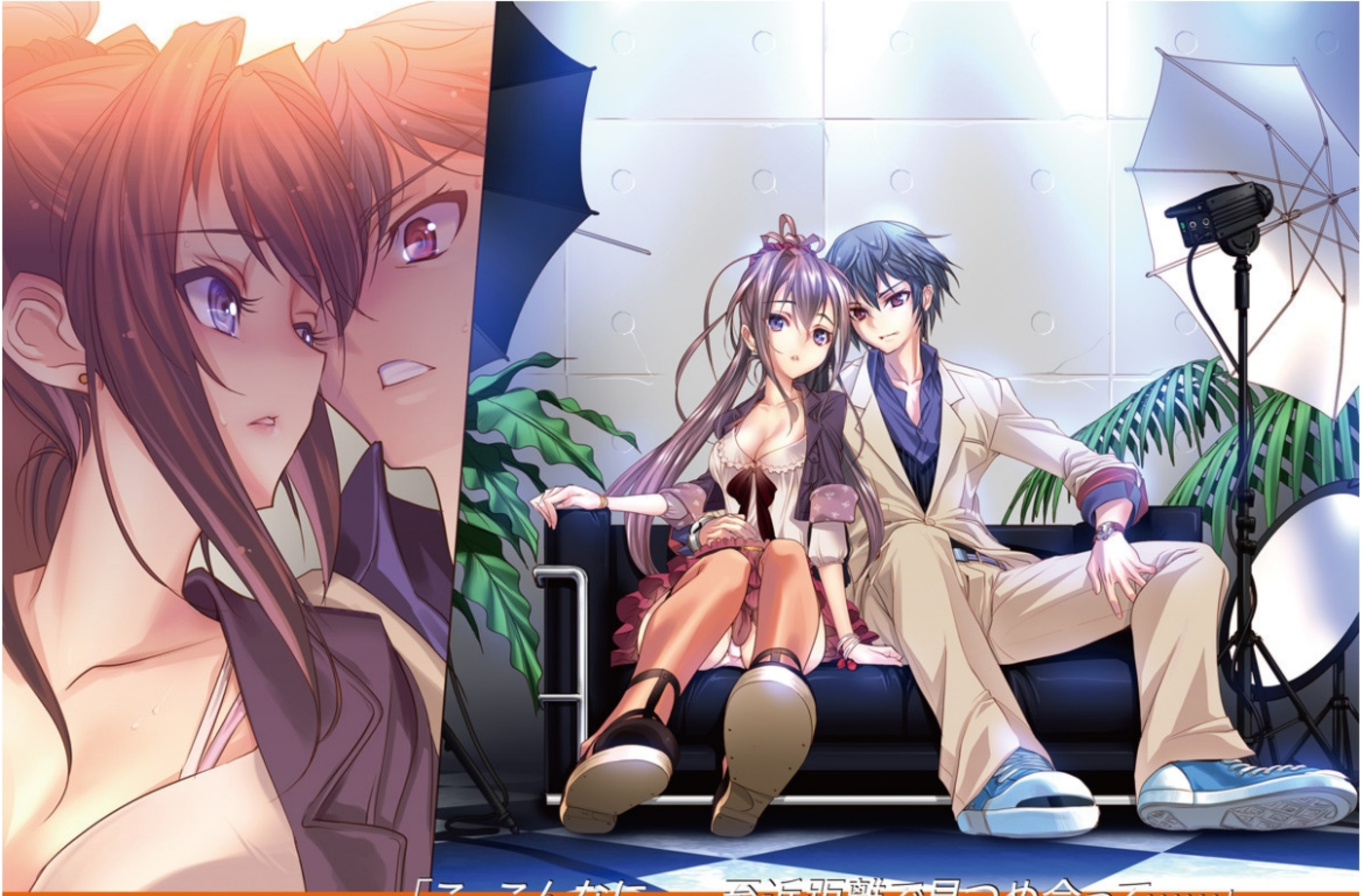
CHOCO

INFINITE STRATOS
インフィニット・ストラトス
7
弓弦イズル
YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO
OVERLAP


「こ、こんなに　至近距離で見つめ合って……」

「戦う……
この『打鉄弐式』で……！」

ゴーレムIII

GOLEM III

無人機『ゴーレム』の改良型。鉄の巨人のイメージである『ゴーレムI』に対し、『ゴーレムIII』は鋼の乙女といった容姿である。複眼レンズだった頭部は、より視野を広く取るために、バイザー型ライン・アイに置き換えられ、羊の巻き角のようなハイパーセンサーが大きく前に突き出している。右腕は肘から先が巨大ブレードになっており、高い格闘性能を有している。一方、左腕は『ゴーレムI』の意匠のままであるが、改良を施したその腕には、掌に超高密度圧縮熱線を放つ砲口が四つあけられている。絶対防御システムを阻害するジャミング装置を搭載。

和名： n/a
型式： n/a
世代： n/a
国家： n/a
分類： n/a

装備： 超高密度圧縮熱線
巨大ブレード
可変シールドユニット
装甲： n/a
仕様： n/a
待機形態： n/a

The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

打鉄弐式

UCHIGANE NISHIKI

白式の開発元である倉持技研によって制作された打鉄の後継機であり、発展型の第三世代IS。スカートアーマーは機動性を重視した独立ウイングスカートに換装されており、防御型の打鉄に比べて、弐式は機動型となっている。肩部シールドから置き換えられた大型のウイングスラスターには小型の補佐ジェットブースターが前後で二基搭載されており、そのシルエットは白式に通じる。高性能誘導ミサイル「山嵐」を六基を搭載し、それぞれが八発の高性能小型ミサイルを備え、最大で同時四八発の一斉射撃が可能。コントロールには空中投影型の球状キーボードを使用するが、瞬はフルカスタムしたもの合計8枚呼び出し、二手二足にて一斉に入力している。

和名： 打鉄弐式
型式： 強化外装・九十八式
世代： 第三世代
国家： 日本
分類： 全距離対応型

装備： マルチロックオンシステムによる
高性能誘導八連装ミサイル『山嵐』x6
荷電粒子砲『春雷』x2
対複合装甲用超振動薙刀《夢現》
装甲： 強化微細粒子複合装甲
仕様： 高機能マルチタスクCPU、打鉄のパッケージを使用可能

The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

Kanzashi SARASHIKI Right

Left Tatenashi SARASHIKI

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312 エピローグ 月のきれいな夜に

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篠ノ之箒 しののの・ほうき Houki SHINONONO

一夏の幼なじみ。
専用IS【紅椿】

更識楯無 さらしき・たてなし Tatenashi SARASHIKI

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更識簪 さらしき・かんざし Kanzashi SARASHIKI

日本代表候補生
専用IS【打鉄弐式】

凰鈴音 ファン・リンイン Lingyin HUANG

中国代表候補生
専用IS【甲龍】

Illustration: CHOCO

件名

【祝】第7巻発売！

□ラフ □クリンナップ ■あとがき

日付

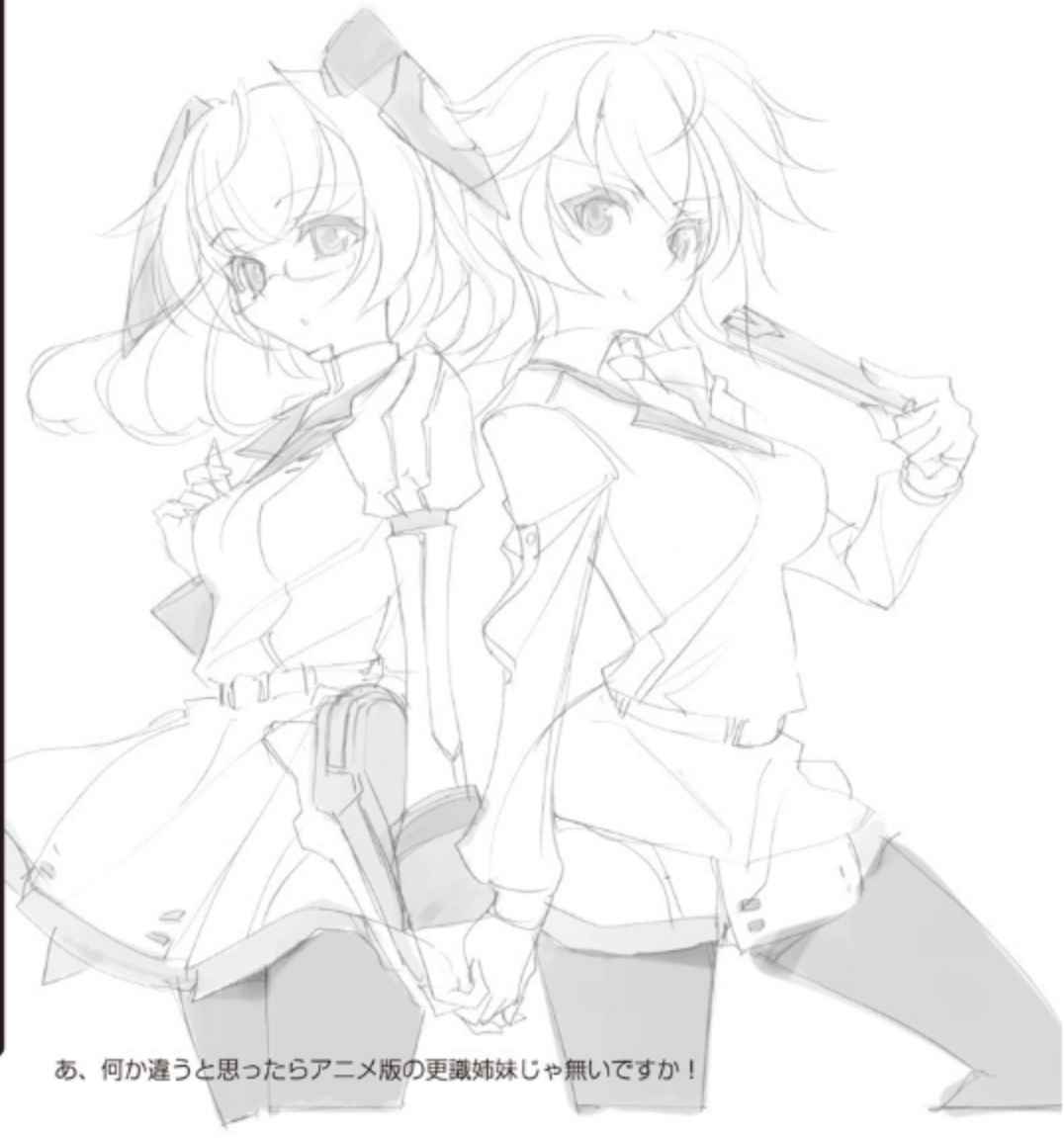
：まだだ！
まだプールに行ける

時刻

：夏休みの最後にまとめて
宿題をやるほうでした。

CHOCO
MUGITANI KOICHI

http://chocolateshop-float.com



あ、何か違うと思ったらアニメ版の更識姉妹じゃ無いですか！

Chapter 1: Sisters

PAM!!

"Wha...!?"

Shooting at me? This is Japan!!

"Ku!"

The bullet flew directly at me.

For some reason, the bullet looked slow yet clear.

"Che."

The attacker in front of me—Orimura Madoka clicked her tongue. The next, moment, the bullet that flew at me stopped there.

The bullet stopped in mid-air. This is—

(Laura's [AIC]!?)

"Get down, Ichika!"

Immediately after following what she said, the knife flew over my head. *Clunk* *clunk*, the fruit juice can that dropped from my hand bounced on the floor.

"So you're here to stop me..."

Madoka accurately blocked the knife that was aimed at her right eye with her hand.

"What!?"

Madoka grabbed the knife in her hand.

"Right back at you."

And threw it back at Laura.

However, to Laura, who released the seal of her left eye, [Odin's Eye][7A 1], that could increase the motion and visual sense several times, it was easy to stop that knife with [AIC].

Though the golden left eye immediately looked for Madoka after blocking that knife, the attacker who deployed her IS gradually disappeared into the night.

"Fuu..."

"STOP RIGHT THERE!"

Avoiding the [AIC]'s stopping ability, Madoka flew off .

Just like that, the attacker who suddenly appeared, disappeared completely into the night.

"Ku..."

"Are you alright, Laura?"

"Who do you think I am? What about you?"

"Ahh, thanks for your help, Laura. Thank you."

"No need for the thanks."

Laura said that as she sheathed her knife and put on the eyepatch.

I patted away the dirt on me and picked up the canned drink that I dropped on the floor.

"Ah."

"Hm? What is it?"

"As expected, Laura's left eye's really beautiful. It was glowing like a diamond."

"Wha-What?"

"It was tough being attacked, but seeing something good may have reduced that to zero—UWAHH!!?"

"Wh-Wha-What reduced to zero, you idiot?"

Laura closed in and stepped hard on my foot.

"IT HURTS!?"

"Fu-Fuun! Hurry up and go back!"

"H-Hey, wait up. At least help me take the drinks."

"Who'd care about you!?"

Without stopping, Laura hurriedly walked away.

"Speaking of which, how were you able to catch up to where I was attacked?"

"Th-That's...!"

"Hm?"

"...I-I could possibly say that, that I tailed two people together or something like that..."

"Huh? What's wrong, Laura?"

"Nothing! Huh, umm, you-you!"

"Uwah, what's wrong!? AH, STOP STEPPING ON MY FOOT! HEY, IDIOT!"

"WHO-WHO'S THE IDIOT!?"

Blushing immediately, Laura stepped forward and gave me a vicious punch.

""You were attacked?""

On Monday, at the dinner table, Houki and Rin exclaimed.

"Ahh, it was last night."

I told them everything, except for the name Orimura Madoka.

On a side note, the reason why I didn't tell them what happened last night immediately was because I didn't want to ruin the happy mood of the birthday celebration.

"The pilot of the [Silent Zephyrs]...what was she aiming for? Did you think about it, Ichika?"

"I don't, know."

As for Charl's question, I answered simply to hide the vague tone.

Better ask Chifuyu-nee.

(But—)

Family affairs...no, about our parents, it's a taboo between Chifuyu-nee and me. Even though I tried to look into it, I couldn't go deeper...no, I didn't want to do it.

"Speaking of which, Ichika-san. Can you feed me the fried egg?"

"Mn, okay. Got it."

I helped feed Cecilia, whose right arm got injured a few days ago. It was really pitiful that she couldn't use her hands properly.

"Ahh, a—n..."

PAK. Cecilia used her hand to cover her mouth as she continued to chew.

She was blushing somewhat, probably because she was embarrassed by everyone looking at her.

(Ah, letting others feed her at this age should be really awkward for her.)

"...What, Cecilia. Actually preparing a dish that needs chopsticks..."

"...You could have just eaten pasta with one hand..."

Cecilia looked away from Rin and Houki who were staring at her and coughed dryly.

On a side note, the meal consisted of salt-baked salmon, egg rolls, sesame spinach salad, potato stew and a steaming bowl of egg custard[7A 2].

"Ichika, she could use a spoon to eat the egg custard, right? Cecilia?"

Charl smiled, and for some reason, the smile on her face had a lot of pressure.

"TH-This is...I-I can't eat properly if I use my left hand!"

"Really? Then let me feed you."

"La-Laura-san!? Wait...at least after it cools down first...AAAAAAHHHH!!!"

The spoon that was full of steaming hot egg custard was forced down onto Cecilia's throat.

Hey hey, stop bullying the injured folks!

"Ara ara, you people look really happy~."

"Ah, Yamada-sensei. And..."

Chifuyu-nee. No, Orimura-sensei's with her as well. Both of them were holding the same dinner trays.

"Don't be too noisy, idiot!"

"I-I'm the one who got hurt..."

"Alcott, I should be suspending you with regards to the battle inside town yesterday, but I'll let it slide this time. Don't be mistaken."

"Ye-Yes..."

On a side note, I was lectured badly today in the chase after the [Silent Zephyrs]. The 2-hour lecture made my body feel like choking.

"Just a quick question. Do you people eat together like this?"

"Ah, yes. That's how it is normally."

"Really?"

"Oh? Orimura-sensei, are you mindful of it~?"

"Yamada-sensei, we'll have a close combat fight as exercise after dinner."

"I-I was joking! A-Aha-Ahahahaha~..."

Yamada-sensei, you seem to have gotten into a tight spot after teasing Chifuyu-nee like that. You should learn your lesson...

"Don't be too noisy...then again, saying this to girls in their teens is going to fall on deaf ears. Oh well, control yourself."

After saying that, Chifuyu-nee brought Yamada-sensei to the table inside.

Since everyone was still around, I couldn't ask about Madoka. Better ask when I have the chance next time.

Just like that, dinner soon ended.

"...Speaking of which, why is everyone following me?"

While returning back to my dorm room, I asked everyone who was following me in a group.

"We-Well...it's not that we are worried about you!"

Rin was the first one who answered.

"Ah-, well, you see, it's just that we want to come to Ichika's room once in a while to talk."

Then Charl added.

"Uu, yup! That's right, Ichika. It's important to communicate with everyone here."

Houki nodded her head too. Didn't we talk a lot during dinner? Well, it's not that I don't like this development.

"Then, Ichika-san? If possible, I hope that you can change my bandages."

"Ohh, okay."

After saying that, Cecilia's face brightened. I guess it's a man's happiness to make her so happy.

"Hey, Ichika, you're spoiling her too much already. What kind of representative candidate is she if she can't treat her own wounds by herself?"

Laura rebuked sharply,

"It seems that in this country, they apply saliva on the wounds to heal them. Perfect timing, try it."

"No Laura, applying saliva doesn't mean that..."[7A 3]

This situation...the saying doesn't suit it, right?

"Is that so? Just to inform you, my saliva has slight healing nanomachines."

Huh, is that true? It seems amazing, but it doesn't seem like something I should delve into.

(Laura's a test tube baby born from the German military research lab.)

She was created as an existence that was to fight—well , even though it's easy to deny this out of righteousness, doing that would mean denying Laura's existence.

(And Laura herself isn't too bothered about it, plus it's not something outsiders can talk much about...)

And ever since she came to Japan—after meeting these people, Laura's life may not just be about fighting anymore, or at least that's what I think.

"Hey, are you listening? Really, you fail as a bride."

"Yes-Yes, I'm sorry."

Every time I am called a **bride**, I secretly recall that kiss. Better not say it out.

Every time I remember that, my face gets rather hot.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"No, it's nothing."

Casually bringing her face over to me, Laura pulled away. I finally reached my room and opened the door.

"How about chairs? Do I need to borrow them?"

"No need. We'll just sit on the bed. Okay, everyone?"

Charl asked the other girls. Yup, such a nice person.

"Oh well, I'll just sit on the bed."

"Yeah, and the quality of this dorm's beds are good."

"As for me, I'm a little unhappy that it's not my bed—well, this can do though."

"I don't mind."

Rin, Houki, Cecilia and Laura, all answered in turn as they walked into the room.

"Ah, what drinks should I buy?"

"It's okay. No need to spend so much effort, Charl. And if there's a need to buy, I—"

"Really! What'll happen if you get attacked after you said that!"

"Ah, no..."

Charl increased the intensity of her voice. I was shocked and could only apologize sincerely.

Charl suddenly recovered and frantically backed away .

"So-Sorry."

"No, no, it's alright."

"Well...as expected, since Ichika's a guy, you hate to be protected by girls, right...?"

"No, no, that's not the case, you know? We-Well, it's too much to be told off like I'm not a guy."

"Is-Is that so? That's great..."

"O-Oh..."

"..."

"..."

Both of us lowered our heads, and silence occurred between us.

Well, it felt like my heart raced...yet it didn't feel like it. ..

""""Jii...."""[7A 4]

"Owahh!?"

Ever since I opened the door, Rin, Houki, Cecilia, Laura...anyway, everyone other than Charl was glaring coldly at me.

"C-Charlotte again..."

"Ichika, you bastard...!"

"That-That's despicable! Charlotte-san!"

"Humph!"

Ah, Laura got angry again. She won't be able to calm down once she's angry...

"Ah—well, Laura...san?"

"WHY LAURA!?"

"MINDFUL ABOUT LAURA? YOU BASTARD!"

"I-I-ICHIKA-SAN!"

Wa—I got trouble for myself again.

I could feel that I saw my future kneeling on the floor and begging for forgiveness.

"Hoo."

Two hours later, I finally got away from the girls and rolled onto the bed.

"Let's take a shower."

I thought as I stood up. At that moment, the room door opened.

"Chia chian~! Tatenashi onee-san~ appears~"

"Please go back."

I immediately closed the door. Immediately after that, I heard the sound of water flowing outside the door.

"--WAHHH!!!"

The water blade sliced the door in half.

Tatenashi-san was holding onto the whip sword [Rusty Nail], currently in its sword mode.

"Ara ara, you can't ignore this onee-san."

Sigh, do whatever you want.

I couldn't help but lower my head dejectedly.

"Can I enter the room?"

"Please."

The [Rusty Nail] in Tatenashi-san's hand disappeared, and what replaced it was the fan she often holds.

The words written on it are the words 'Disastrous situation'[7A 5]. Don't tell me—wait, there's no need to doubt it. She planned this visit right from the beginning, right?

"Then, what do you want. If possible, I want to take a shower now."

"Hm? Then just bathe as you talk. Because I, didn't bring my swimsuit today."

"DAAAAAAAAAAA!! HOW DID SUCH A DEVELOPMENT OCCUR! RIGHT NOW, URGENTLY, JUST TALK!"

"Ahaha, you became so desperate. Oh my, you're really cute."

"Yeah yeah."

Feeling completely fatigued all over, I poured tea for Tatenashi-san.

"Mn~ nice Gyokuro tea[7A 6]. But you need to work against the tea professor in the Student Council office."

We—I thought I'm supposed to be the Vice-President of the Student Council.

"Tatenashi –san."

"What?"

"I'm going to chase you out, you know?"

"No~"

Haa. I sighed at the end. It seems like I will be toyed by her in the future. Goodbye, my sigh.

"Then, what is it about today?"

"Ichika-kun, weren't you attacked? Do you need security personnel in your house?"

"No...No need to spend so much effort."

She has an IS. I don't want to think about it, but the worst case scenario for an ordinary person would likely be death.

"I guessed you would say that."

"Really?"

Seems like it.

"Also, I'd like to request one thing."

"?"

Tatenashi-san asked in a rare ambiguous tone.

"I...leave her to you!"

Pa! She suddenly put her hands together and prayed to me.

"Huh? Huh?"

"I'll leave my imouto[7A 7] to you!"[7A 8]

"WHAT!?"

This sudden development stunned me.

"Haa. You're talking about...your own little sister? A first year."

"Yeah, her name's Sarashiki Kanzashi. Ah, this is her photo."

After saying that, she showed me a handphone photo. The girl in the photo seems to be a little shady.

(Is this Tatenashi-san's imouto? But she feels a little—)

"Just some words beforehand...I hope that you don't reveal that I said this..."

Tatenashi-san explained this first. It's hard to imagine that she would usually say this.

"My sister, she's...a little passive, or rather..."

She seemed to be choosing her words.

"Someone gloomy."

Uwa—that's straight to the point alright.

"Is-Is that so?"

"But she really has talent. She's a Personal IS pilot, but—"

"But?"

"She hasn't gotten her unit yet."

"Ah?"

Then she shouldn't be called a Personal IS pilot...

"Which means that, even though she's a Representative Cadet of Japan, her personal unit wasn't complete, so she didn't get one."

"Oh."

"Don't look like it doesn't involve you, Ichika-kun. You were the one who caused that, you know?"

"Huh!?"

Why did my name pop out suddenly.

"Kanzashi-chan's IS developer was from Kuramochi Machinery Development, which means..."

"It's the same place as where [Byakushiki] was born... right?"

"Yes. And because all the manpower was sent to develop [Byakushiki], it's still incomplete now."

"I see..."

"So! That's why it's all Ichika-kun's fault!"

"So-Sorry..."

"Is that so? So Class 4's personal IS pilot would always take a break every time when there was a need for a Personal IS. She's a cadet without a personal IS; that's something humiliating."

"Then, what's this about leaving your imouto to me?"

"It's like this. As the [Cannonball Fast] incident happened yesterday, we will be having a mixed-year tag-team tournament next time to improve the ability of all Personal IS pilots."

"Haa, is that so?"

"Please! Please tag with Kanzashi-chan!"

Tatenashi-san put the fan beside me and begged me again.

"Ho-Hold on, Tatenashi-san. You don't have to beg me so formally."

"Huh, I see...so, that means, you can?"

She asked gently.

She looked really small, and most likely, it's created by the huge contrast from what she would normally do.

(That's quite a bother...)

Inexplicably, once someone that's so carefree like me gets requested so earnestly like this, I'll end up trying to fulfill her wish to my utmost ability.

"Uu, if possible...please don't mention my name."

"Huh? Why?"

"That kid...it seems that she has an inferiority complex towards me...I guess..."

Tatenashi-san said that with an ambiguous tone.

Seeing her like this, I can tell that the sisters don't really get along well.

"You're not good with your imouto...or something like that?"

"Uu..."

Seeing Tatenashi-san lower her head dejected like this, I started to believe that my thoughts weren't wrong.

These sisters aren't getting along. The elder sister trying to improve herself, and a resistant imouto... thinking about this, I can only think of another two people.

(Houki and Tabane-san are like that too...)

Tabane-san already prepared the personal unit for Houki, yet Houki still remained stubborn. Ever since then, Tabane-san never showed up. Most likely, it's like that now as well.

(Really, that Houki...)

Oh well, since those two are the same, I can't refuse her.

"Then I'll try to act as natural as possible and interact with her."

"Mn, please. Also, that kid's somewhat hard to get along, so be careful with your words."

"Ah."

Anyway, I better process Sarashiki Kanzashi of Class 1 -4 into my mind.

"Please do so, okay? But, please don't force yourself..."

"This isn't like you, Tatenashi-san. Wouldn't you say something like 'I'll rub your back' as a reward?"

"Is-Is that so? Ahaha...we, well, for this kind of things, if you wish..."

Yup, that's not like Tatenashi-san at all.

"I'll massage your shoulders for you."

"Uu, mn? Huh? Ichika-kun?"

"Don't mind."

"O-Okay..."

I went behind Tatenashi-san, kneeled on the bed and started massaging her.

"Ahh--, your shoulders are so stiff--. You've been working till late recently?"

"Uu, yeah, about there. Ahh, owowow..."

"The area around your neck is really stiff. At this point, I recommend stretching and a bath in warm water. It's best if you take a longer time to bath."

"I-I got it. Nn..."

"How about I share some of your workload?"

"No-No need. Don't get cocky. Don't you have to be loaned out to other clubs?"

"Ah, speaking of which, that's true."

"Re-Really. That can't do. Onee-san hates kids who give up on their work."

"I got it I got it."

Tatenashi-san finally went back to normal. I continued to massage her for about 30 minutes before releasing her.

"Mm~! I'm a lot more relaxed now. Thank you."

"No problem. Leave your sister to me then."

"Mn. Please."

As a gesture from the elder sister, Tatenashi-san bowed before leaving.

"Anyway, let's—"

What appeared in front of me was the door that was sliced in half.

"Request for another room..."

In a room that wasn't lit, Madoka was changing the bandages on her right hand alone.

Using the robotic nano-machines multiple times, her wound healed, and the syringe that was used was thrown around the room.

"I'm coming in, **M**."

Entering the room without knocking on the door was the cadre[7A 9] of [Phantom Task], Squall.

Her lush blond hair flowed smoothly as she entered the room.

"Can you please explain the reason why you took action on your own yesterday? Orimura Madoka-san."

"..."

Squall maintained her smile. In contrast, Madoka just glanced at her and continued to wrap her own bandages.

"Even if that was an eventful encounter for you, we were really troubled by you. If you continue to take action on your own like that."

"...I got it."

"Your mission is to steal IS from all over the world. If you often use IS for things other than that—"

BOOM! An explosion rang out, and the table and the medical kit on it were sent flying.

The next moment, Madoka's neck got choked as she was slammed against the wall.

"—Fufufu. Your reaction's quick as always."

Squall used partial deployment of the IS to float in mid-air, and 4 floating cannons of the [Silent Zephyrs] appeared behind Madoka, and looked like they were ready to fire out anytime.

"..."

Madoka was released by her and landed back on the bed. Squall removed her IS and landed on the bed too. The bed took the brunt of both their weights and let out a cracking sound.

"Hey, **M**. Whether you're Orimura Madoka or not, I don't really care, but please maintain your identity as **M** while being a member of [Phantom Task]."

"...I intend to do so until I settle the score."

"Settle the score...with Orimura Ichika?"

"Humph...he's not a threat at all. I can kill him whenever I want to."

"So that means, with Orimura Chifuyu...right?'

After Squall said that, the lips on Madoka's expressionless face curled up as she looked really happy. However, that was an evil smile.

"Orimura Chifuyu, is it? She doesn't have an IS, so I don't think she's much of a threat."

After the sentence ended, Squall blocked Madoka's karate chop and jumped back to avoid the kick.

Looking closely, Madoka, who was still smiling, now looked angry.

"Don't you ever humiliate her...Someone like you will never be a match for nee-san..."[7A 10]

"Okay okay, I got it. So **M**, don't throw the knife. You'll damage the wallpaper."

"Humph..."

Madoka seemed to be embarrassed by the useless taunting and returned the knife back into its sheath.

"I'll go sleep for a while. Ah, **M**? There's still some time until the next mission, so please control yourself a bit."

"Got it."

"I like honest kids. Bye then, **M**."

Like how she came in, Squall finished what she wanted to do and returned back to her room.

The door shut, and the room was covered in silence and darkness. At that moment, Madoka took the knife out and slid it across her face.

"..."

The skin got cut, and fresh red blood oozed out.

Madoka got overwhelmed with unspeakable happiness through this act of harming the face that looked like Chifuyu.

The delighted expression's reflected on the side of the knife.

"Yahoo--, Orimura-kun, Shinonono-kun."

During the rest period after the second period, the second year student Mayazumi Kaoruko-sempai appeared in Class 1-1.

"Huh, is there something?"

"Nothing much--, just a little request."

"A request, for Ichika and me?"

"Mn, yes. Listen, my older sister's working at a publication company. Can both of you accept an exclusive interview? Ah, speaking of which, it's this magazine."

After saying that, Mayazumi-sempai showed me a fashion magazine for teens.

"Let me see. Erm—isn't this magazine unrelated to IS?"

"Mn? Huh? Is this the first time you're doing this work ?"

"Haa."

Houki and I didn't understand it as we could only nod our heads vaguely.

"As for this, Personal IS pilots are either Representatives or Cadets, so they end up in the entertainment industry as well. I guess they can be said to be recognized idols of the countries, so they normally end up being models. Ah, there seem to be some who'll become actors based on the country."

"Is that so? Houki."

"Don-Don't ask me! I don't know!"

Both of us are the same. We're in our teens, yet we don't understand anything about the entertainment industry.

(Ah, speaking of which, Cecilia seemed to have said that she once acted as a model in England before.)

And she even showed me a photo.

The photo showed Cecilia in a nice fitting dress.

(Uu, I'm a guy, so I should be wearing a tuxedo...)

I don't feel like doing it.

Just when I was thinking about that, Rin came to our class.

"What, Ichika. Never been a model before? Can't be helped then. Let me show you my photos."

"No-No need."

"Why?"

PAN! Ow, my head got hit.

"Because, well, you must be faking it."

"Wha-What are you talking about!? I'll show you! Watch this! Now!"

Rin took out her phone, slid out the photos and showed them to me forcefully. Hey, stop pulling my neck!

"Ohh..."

"Uuu..."

Looking at the photos together, Houki and I showed a similar reaction.

To add on to that, the screen of the phone showed Rin in a casual fitting dress.

"Heh...not bad."

"Fufu. Isn't that right? Oh yeah, this was taken last summer—"

Ding dong. The bell that indicated the end of break time rang.

"Ichika-kun. You're loaned out to the kendo club, right ? I'll come over after school. Bye—"

Just like how she came here, Mayazumi-sempai went away quickly.

I thought that Rin would return back to Class 2, but she seemed to be really interested in showing off her photos.

"And also, this one is—"

GONK! A fist was slammed on Rin's head.

"OW!"

Rin frowned as she turned around, and as expected, standing there was Chifuyu-nee.

"Go back to Class 2."

"I-I got it..."

Rin left dejectedly. Same as usual.

Speaking of which, Rin doesn't come over to Class 1 often because of this. Maybe she can do so after school tomorrow.

"Then, we'll be explaining the effective methods of evading in close ranged combat and pulling the distance. "

Just like that, lessons continued as per usual.

"Please use this towel."

"Kya--, it's the real Orimura-kun!"

"Over here! I want the towel too!"

"Hey hey, can you give me a massage?"

"I don't give such services."

"Che. Orimura-kun's so mean—"

In the kendo dojo after school, I quickly gave a few kendo members towels after they finished their training.

Like what Mayuzumi-sempai said, today's the ' Orimura Ichika club loan-out day'.

"And for you, Houki."

"Ah, yes. Thanks."

Houki took off her facemask, undid the towel and buried her face in it.

"..."

"Wha-What's wrong? Why are you looking at me?"

"No, it's just that I find that Houki's rather stylish in the hakama."[7A 11]

"Fu-Fuun..."

Houki suddenly looked away. Is she shy?

"Ya, Orimura-kun? It's been a while, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes. We met for the first time since the school festival, kendo-club President."

"Ufufu? Doesn't everyone look really happy? So, was winning the bingo game worthy?"

But why does this person say everything in questions?

Just when I was thinking about that, she suddenly slipped through the gaps between the members and quickly disappeared into thin air.

(Yup, she's a mystery alright.)

"Hey, Houki."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"As for what Mayuzumi-sempai said during the break, what do you intend to do?"

"I refuse. It doesn't match my personality to show up like this."

"As expected."

That's a classic Houki's reply. Just when I was nodding away, that Mayuzumi-sempai appeared in front of us.

"Yahoo--, sorry to keep you waiting~ So, have you thought of the interview?"

"Ah, about that, Houki, she—"

Seems like she will refuse this. Just when I was about to continue, Mayuzumi-san interrupted me.

"Jyan! This super luxurious first-class hotel dinner coupon will be your reward. Of course, it's for two."

After saying that, Mayuzumi-sempai passed Houki and me the brochure of the hotel.

Is that so. Sure, it looks luxurious. But since Houki's going to refuse it, it can't be helped.

"I accept."

Huh?

"Huh, really? I thought you hated this kind of stuff, Shinonono-san."

"No, I should experience this once in a while."

Huh? Huh?

"Really? It's settled then. Orimura-kun's alright too, right? Then, the interview will be two days later, on Sunday. Please get there before 2pm."

"Well, please wait...."

"Bye then~"

Just like that, Mayuzumi-san left carefreely.

After the door of the kendo dojo closed, I stared at Houki.

"Houki."

"What?"

"What happened to your ideals?"

"My-My thoughts vary according to the times! What's there to grumble about!?"

The bamboo blade hit my face hard.

"Haa...never mind, it doesn't matter as long as you're fine with it."

"Is-Is that so? Speaking of which...this dinner voucher at this hotel, you-you'll be coming along too, right!?"

Houki continued to stutter, looking like it was hard for her to say it.

"Yeah. Of course. I'd be angry if I didn't get the voucher after agreeing to be interviewed."

"Is-Is that so? I see. Uu. So that's it!"

Houki's face suddenly brightened as she held tightly onto the promotional brochure.

Wa, what'll happen if she crushes it? I can't tell the address like that.

"What, what? Shinonono-san's going on a date with Ichika-kun?"

"So cool! I want to go too!"

"Ah, this hotel's famous on the international scene. Heeh~"

All the kendo club members who were looking at us from afar crowded around us all of a sudden.

"Th-This, that...it's not, a da-dat-date...it's not a date at all!"

""""Heeh~""""

Seeing Houki trying to defend herself so badly, the girls gave smiles with deep meanings behind them.

(What, that Houki? Isn't she getting along well with everyone in the kendo club?)

I sighed at myself for worrying too much and slightly heaved a sigh of relief.

Speaking of Houki, she didn't really get along well with others in the past, so I always had to worry about her.

(Speaking of which, it's Sunday again?)

And with Tatenashi-san's request, it seems that I'll have a really busy weekend.

(Time to go.)

The 4th period ended, and the classroom became really busy at noon break.

"Let's go to the canteen, Ichika."

Charl smiled at me as usual as she asked me out. I'm really grateful for that, but I can only put my hands together and refuse.

"Sorry Charl. I've got something to do."

"Is-Is that so? Then, what should I do..."

"De-cha—n, come along with us~"

Unexpectedly, the one who came in was Nohohon-san[7A 12] and the rest.

Nohohon-san's still the same as quite, wearing overly long sleeves as she casually flailed her arms.

"De-De-chan?"

"Let's go—Ehehe~"

Nohohon-san grabbed Charl's arms in a really slow manner.

Charl herself didn't avoid that, and anyone can tell from this that she's really a kind person.

"Then, let's go!"

Several girls were waiting in front of the classroom with Tanimoto-san leading. Nohohon-san met up with them and dragged the hesitant Charl's arm to the canteen .

(Then, to Class 4.)

According to the information Tatenashi-san provided, Kanzashi-san's habit seemed to be eating bread in the classroom.

(Since I bought bread as well, hopefully, I can talk with her well.)

As a side note, regarding the mixed-year tag-team match, there was an explanation during SHR[7A 13] this morning. If I don't leave in a hurry, there will be other

personal IS pilots requesting me to pair up with them, so I have to make haste.

"I've been waiting for you for a long time, Ichika!"

DON.

I met Rin just when I arrived at the corridor.

"You'll pair up with me!"

"Sorry Rin, I already have my partner."

"Ah? Pair?—Don't tell me it's Charlotte!?"

Huh? Why would she mention Charl's name now?"

"...Kuu~ she took the initiative just because she paired with him before. How can I take that..."

"Hm? What did you say?"

"No-Nothing! Then? Who's that partner? I'll make her switch with me. Hurry up and say it!"

Uwa. What's with this logic? She's really scary.

"Erm--, she's..."

"Who?"

"—Sorry."

36 stratagems. If all else fails, retreat. I dashed off to escape.[7A 14]

"Ah—hey! Wait! Ichika!"

I ran down the stairs to the first level and made a huge detour before arriving at the second level.

"Fuu, finally at Class 4."

"Ahh!? It's Orimura-kun!"

"Huh, no way! Why is he here!?"

"Is-Is there any reason for you to come to Class 4?"

An onslaught of people came here...well, I really hate this.

"Excuse me, is Sarashiki-san around?"

""Huh...?""

The girls' voices overlapped one other.

"Sarashiki-san...?"

"'That'?"

The wall of girls split apart like a sea being split to form a road. Through a straight line, I could see her sitting at the last seat at the back of the room, near the window.

She continued to hit the keyboard while looking at the screen in mid-air, leaving the bread she got from the bun shop.

"..."

(Huh? I heard from Tatenashi-san that she was quite passive, but she's unexpectedly active...that's weird.)

Just when I was thinking about this, a girl said softly.

"Excuse me....is it that you want Sarashiki-san to be your partner after hearing the SHR explanation this morning with regards to the personal pilot tag team tournament...or something like that?"

"Hm? Ah, something like that."

I nodded my head, and the commotion spread around the crowd in waves.

"I see...but that girl doesn't have a Personal IS?"

"And she's been taking leaves for all activities up till now."

"And the girl who has a Personal IS is her elder sister —"

I didn't wish for them to continue, so I put my hands together and said really loudly.

"Sorry! I came here looking for that girl."

After saying that, I slipped through the crowd and headed towards Kanzashi-san's seat.

"Excuse me, can I borrow a chair?"

I borrowed a chair from a girl nearby, and sat down without getting permission.

"..."

Katakatakatakatakata. The rapid typing on the keyboard could be heard.

It's not the holographic type, but the old mechanical type.

"Excuse me—"

I again looked at the girl in front of me.

Her hair's short, and in contrast to Tatenashi-san, hers is curled inwards.

The eyes that are staring hard at the screen are longer and thinner than normal, and looked a bit empty as well.

The rectangular glasses that she was wearing looked like they were trying to prevent others from approaching her.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Orimura Ichika."

"..."

Her fingers suddenly stopped.

"...I know."

Ohh, that's good. I finally got a reaction from her.

Just when I was thinking about this, Kanzashi-san stood up.

"?"

Shaking her right shoulder slightly and putting it down, she sat down and continued to hit at the keyboard .

"Well..."

"...I, have the ...right to punch you...but, that would be a hassle...so never mind."

Uu, she's still mindful about the Personal IS?

It's true that Kanzashi-san's IS was incomplete as they were busy building my [Byakushiki], but that couldn't be helped.

"...Anything you want with me?"

"Oh, yeah. Could you be my partner in this tag tournament?"

"No..."

Uwa. That was an immediate rejection.

But I won't give up!

"Please don't say that. Please."

"...I don't want to. And you-you don't...have to worry about looking for other groups..."

"Ahh, it's not that..."

Uu, I really can't think of a good reason.

And I can't say that 'Tatenashi-san requested me to ask you'...

"Well, actually, everyone decided—"

"FOUND YOU, ICHIKA!"

ACK! GUAN YU!?[7A 15]

...No, that's Rin.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN CLASS 4!? AT LEAST COME TO CLASS 2!!"

"Gue..."

The collar of my uniform got grabbed, and I found breathing hard.

HEY, STOP IT, IDIOT! WHAT'LL HAPPEN IF YOU OVER-STRETCH THE UNIFORM!?

"STOP SPOUTING NONSENSE AND COME OVER!"

"Th-Then, bye then, Sarashiki-san. See you next time."

"..."

Kanzashi-san didn't really answer me as she just took a bite off the bun.

--Just like that, I was forcefully deported to Class 2.

"Here."

"What's going on...is this, green pepper sliced meat?"

"Ye-Yeah. Well, it's like this. I want to prove that I can do dishes other than sweet and sour pork."

"I see~ but since I have yakisoba[7A 16] bread today—"

Before I finished, my yakisoba was suddenly taken away. Ahh, my yakisoba!

"You have to eat my green pepper meat. Got it!?"

"Even though you say that, you just ate some of it. You really won't mind!?"

"...Indirect kiss..."

"Huh?"

"No-Nothing!? Stop yapping and eat it!"

"I got it, I got it! Really, it can't be helped..."

Though I'm feeling sorry for the loss of the yakisoba, I focused on eating the green pepper meat.

"Ohh? It's good. It's really good, Rin!"

"Fu-Fufu! Of course!"

It's flavorful but not greasy as it lures me to continue dumping the green pepper meat into my mouth.

"Ah, also, your yakisoba bread's really nice..."

"? I bought that from the store."

"The-The standards of this Academy's shops are really high! Any problem!?"

No, I don't really mind.

"Oh, oh yeah, Ichika. You'll pair up with me for the tag team tournament, right?"

"No, because I've already paired up...sorry."

"Wh-Why-Why!? Who! Who is it!? I'll make her switch with me. Say it!"

"Uwa! Don't say it like just now."

"FESS UP!!"

"I SAID NO!!"

"Ngugugu..."

I don't know what Rin will say if I continue to stay here. Better finish up and go back to Class 1 first.

"I-Ichika!"

"No."

"I haven't said anything yet!"

"A battle or something like that, right? I refuse."

"Uu! How-How did you know..."

"Bye Rin. The bento[7A 17] was nice. Thank you."

"Huh—ah, u-uu..."

I left Rin, who looked shocked for some reason, and went back to Class 1.

"I've been waiting for you for a long time, Ichika. You'll pair up with me, right?"

...I got caught by Laura, who was standing crosslegged .

"Ah--, no...about that..."

"This is the application form. Hurry up and sign."

"So-Sorry Laura...but I've already gotten my partner..."

"What...?"

Seeing Laura about to say 'Who's that person, hurry and spill it out', I could only beg earnestly.

"I'm really sorry! But she was already chosen."

"..."

Laura's eyes narrowed. Uu, that's really scary.

"...Say that again..."

"We-Well, Laura? Wait, let's talk it through, alright?"

"TOO SLOW!"

Laura used partial deployment of her IS to summon a plasma saber and hacked at me. WAAAHH—!

"Stop it, idiot. I only need the smell of burnt meat from a roast meat shop."

My savior Chifuyu-nee appeared from behind, and she quickly grabbed Laura's wrist before throwing her out of the window.

"Instructor! This is a problem between husband and wife!"

Laura gently landed on the windowsill and dropped back onto the floor with that flowing long hair trailing her.

Amazing. She's just like a cat.

"What husband and wife, idiot? I don't need an uncouth sister-in-law."

"!!"

Those direct words seemed to be a really heavy hit to her, as Laura collapsed onto the floor.

H-Huh? Hey—are you alright?

"I've been rejected by the instructor. I've been rejected by the instructor..."

Not good. She seemed to be repeating the same words like she's raving. And her eyes are really empty.

"Hey, Orimura, send Bodewig back to her seat. We're about to begin lessons."

"I-I got it. Hey, Laura, hurry up and get up."

"...It's over for me..."

Wahh, that's one huge trauma.

Can't be helped. I carried Laura up and brought her back to her seat.

"AHH!! ORIMURA-KUN'S CARRYING BODEWIG-SAN IN A PRINCESS CRADLE!!"[7A 18]

"I-ICHIKA-SAN!? WHAT'S GOING ON...I HOPE YOU CAN GIVE AN EXPLANATION!"

"ICHIKA, YOU BASTARD...."

"UWAH! LAURA'S REALLY SNEAKY!"

With Tanimoto-san leading, Cecilia, Houki and even Charl got up to surround me.

"Hurry up and get back to your seats, idiots."

PAM!! The sounds of the attendance book, which I'm really grateful for, resounded throughout the classroom.

"Too slow, Ichika! I'm already here!"

At the third arena after school, Ichika and Houki were doing special training today.

If it was as usual, both of them should be even. But having gotten grasp on the activation of [Kenran Butou], Houki had almost unlimited energy as she used it to carry out continuous [Ignitions Boost]s and force Ichika into a tight spot.

"Ku!"

Flying in a Cross Grid pattern to change directions, he fired [Setsura]'s particle cannon, but it was negated by the energy attack of [Akatsubaki]'s saber, [Karaware].

"HAAAAAA!!!"

Houki used [Ignition Boost] and deployed her [Fold-Out Armor] at the same time, using the thrusters' energy to accelerate and attack Ichika.

"Guu!"

Due to this overpowering attack, [Byakushiki]'s shield energy got hit hard.

Houki used the automatic controls of the [Fold-Out Armor] to change directions in high speeds before shooting the energy beams of the [Amatsuki], bathing [Byakushiki] in a storm of lasers.

"It's over, Ichika!"

"Not yet!"

Both of them went into the high speeds of [Ignition Boost]. After that, the clash of blades created sparks that scattered throughout the sky above the third arena.

...

.....

.....

"Fuu..."

Houki wiped away her sweat, changed into her uniform and let her hair fly.

"~♪"

Feeling really happy, Houki started humming, a rare feat at that as she tied the knot of her ponytail.

(I beat Ichika today. So he should have definitely change his view of me. Fufufu.)

Not only that, there was something that made Houki even happier.

(Ichika said that he decided on his partner in the tag-team tournament...)

Tying her ribbon forcefully, the glamorous black hair swayed about beautifully.

(It must be me! Really, that Ichika! Wha-What...since it came to that, can't he just pair up with me?)

PATAN! Houki energetically closed the locker door, and found Cecilia walking over from the other side.

"Fufufun—♪ fufu, ufufu."

She was feeling rather good too, as Cecilia opened her locker to change clothes.

(Really, that Ichika-san, saying that his partner's already decided. He's referring...to me!)

Lost in her own delusion that's only positive for herself , it's unknown whether it's a privilege for a girl in love or the energy that's contained in teenage girls. It's really a mystery.

(Ahh, finally...finally with Ichika-san...ahhh!)

Originally dressed in the IS suit, Cecilia changed into her uniform, tied the ribbon in front of her chest, and finally noticed Houki's presence.

"Oh my, Shinonono-san."

"Cecilia? You're in a good mood."

Sparks were expected to fly between these two, but Houki and Cecilia smiled at each other.

"Today's really a good day."

"Ahh, yes. It is."

(Fufu, Houki-san's so pitiful...that she doesn't know that I'm paired with Ichika-san.)

(Humph, that Cecilia. I wonder what expression she will show if she realizes that I'm paired with Ichika.)

Both of them continued to believe in their advantages and looked down on each other.

"See you later, Cecilia."

"Okay, Houki-san. I wish you well."

Both of them kept their smiles as they went by each other.

After that, as they completely left each other, they smiled confidently.

(I win!)

(Victory is mine!)

Two hours passed after that. After dinner, the tragedy occurred...

"Sorry! I'm really sorry, you two!"

After dinner, Houki and Cecilia came over to my room , and I bowed and apologized to them.

""...Ah?""

Both of them let out cries of disbelief...uu, that's troublesome.

"Well, how should I put it? My partner's already decided."

"So-So that means, that means me—"

"So-So, choose me—"

"?"

I was stunned for a while. I really don't understand what they're trying to say.

"Well—, that's how it is. Sorry!"

"Un-Unforgivable..."

"Do you think I'll forgive you!?"

Houki summoned her sword [Karaware], and Cecilia summoned her sniper rifle [Starlight MKIII].

"WAAHHH!!? HOLD ON HOLD ON!!"

"THERE'S NO POINT IN SAYING ANYTHING MORE! JUST STAY THERE!"

"IF YOU'RE NOT PAIRING WITH ME, YOU'LL JUST...!"

Mesu...

(Mesu?)

BAM!

""""!?""""

The door was sent flying over at an amazing speed, hitting Houki and Cecilia directly.

"Hey, idiots. It's partial deployment, but you're still using your IS. As punishment, run 10 laps around the 1st arena with your IS on. Of course, you're not allowed to use [PIC] nor thrusters. Understood?"

"O-Orimura-sensei..."

Speaking of which, Chifuyu-nee's the dorm head of the first years, so she should be patrolling around.

But even so—

(How much force is needed to kick that door down...)

What a tragedy. My door got broken again.

"Go!"

""Un-Understood!""

Houki and Cecilia suddenly straightened their backs and answered before glaring at each other and running

out of the dorm...running 10 rounds with IS equipment on? That must be really tough. How pitiful.

"Hey, Orimura."

"Ye-Yes?"

"You're always the source of commotion. Time to choose a partner, idiot."

"Ah, yes..."

"...I'll come back to get the room door repair form later."

Chifuyu-nee just left these words before leaving...no, you're the one who destroyed the door!

KLUNK *KLUNK* *KLUNK*.

"Haa! Haa! Haa!"

KINK *KINK* *KINK*

"Fuu! Fuu! Fuu!"

The night sky covered the first arena, and the red and blue machines let out heavy metallic sounds as they ran around the track.

"Haa, Cecilia! Thi-This is all your fault!

"Fuu, fuu! What! Houki-san, stop mistaking things! Fuu, fuu!"

KLUNK *KLUNK* *KLUNK*

"I-I'll settle this one day...!"

"That-That's my line...!"

Both of them glared at each other as they slowed down . Either way, the IS' too heavy.

"Gu, gu, gu, 6 rounds, left..."

"I-I won't lose...definitely...!"

Trying to vent the anger that they couldn't vent on Ichika, Houki and Cecilia continued to glare at each other as they continued to run in the middle of the night.

Chapter 2: Girls Beat

"..."

The location was the IS preparation room in IS Academy. A facility near the arenas, and originally meant to house the 'Maintanence Branch' that was to be started amongst the second years.

At the moment, Tatenashi's imouto, Kanzashi was in there.

"...the responses from all the parts are so slow. Why..."

Kanzashi continued to hit the mechanical keyboard as she focused on the holographic screen.

--Using her own ability to materialize the incomplete machine.

This was what Tatenashi did when she used [Mysterious Lady].

Since my sister can do it, I can do it too. Such thoughts never entered Kanzashi's mind. But if she couldn't do

such a thing, she would feel that she wouldn't be able to catch up to her sister's shadow at all. This inferiority complex was engraved deeply in her.

"Core compatibility hasn't increased at all...am I not suitable to...?"

Using the generic nature of the [Revive] as reference, this multi-ranged IS was called [Uchigane Nishiki][7B 1].

"...Fuu."

Unable to think of an answer, Kanzashi sighed, turned off the screen and kept her keyboard.

(Better go back and watch anime...)

Watching anime was an interest of Kanzashi that nobody else knew. She watched them all, whether new or old.

The genre was about Hero Battles, where the hero takes down the evil organization. Personally, Kanzashi liked these types of anime that were simple and easy to understand.

When she was young, the picture book she liked was of course 'Momotarou'. As a side note, Tatenashi liked ' Urashima Tarou'.

(What should I watch today...)

Just when Kanzashi was thinking of this and got ready to leave the preparation room.

"Yo."

The automatic door opened, and standing outside was Ichika.

He was holding onto canned drinks.

"Red tea and grape juice. Which one do you prefer?"

"..."

Kanzashi ignored him and left the preparation room. Ichika hurriedly followed her.

"Hey."

"..."

"I'm talking to you."

"..."

"Kanzashi-san."

She suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"Don't call me by my name..."

"Uu--, then, Sarashiki-san."

"Don't call me by my family name."

"Then—"

"Don't...bother me."

Kanzashi said and walked off.

Half a step away, Ichika followed her closely.

"Anyway, take the juice. I don't need two cans."

"..."

"Which one?"

"...Then, the grape..."

"Understood."

After saying that, Ichika handed the can over. Kanzashi reached her hand out to take it, and both their hands touched for a moment.

"...!"

Kanzashi felt like she got electrocuted as her body suddenly backed away. Her arm shrank back.

Seeing this, Ichika looked somewhat suspicious. Perhaps unhappy with this look, Kanzashi seemed to feel unhappy as she snatched the juice away.

"Don't walk so fast."

"..."

Kanzashi just took the juice and walked away quickly.

"Erm...that girl over there!"

"..."

"Wait wait wait! I'm talking about you!"

"...Wha-What do you mean?"

"You told me not to call you by your name."

"...I would rather have you call me by my name than call me like this..."

"Really. Then, Kanzashi."

Stare.

"...san."

"Fuu." Kanzashi sighed and increased her speed.

"Hey hey, Kanzashi-san, pair up with me."

"No..."

"Don't say that."

"...Anyway, why do you want to pair up with me...?"

"Huh? That's because..."

Tatenashi told him not to say her name, so Ichika didn't know how to answer.

2 seconds later, lights flashed in Ichika's mind.

"Because I want to see Kanzashi-san's IS!"

"!"

PA! A sharp slapping sound can be heard.

"...Huh?"

"..."

After that, Kanzashi ran away without looking back.

"Uu..."

I went back to my own room, and rubbed the cheek that had just been slapped by Kanzashi.

"Why was she so angry..."

I started to think.

...

.....

.....

"Ah, yes. That person's personal unit's still can't be used in actual battle."

I clapped my hands together. Speaking of which, Tatenashi-san seemed to have mentioned the same thing.

(...Hmm—)

I took the IS Academy terminology reference book from my bookshelf.

"Erm, what did the book say."

IS Academy started a class for the second years, the ' Maintenance Branch' that specialized in the development , research and assembly of IS. During the ranking tournaments of the Academy... the students, especially the second years and older, will get this Maintenance Branch to team up with them—as described in the book.

(Hm? If that's the case, couldn't Kanzashi get the Maintenance Branch to help her out?)

GON *GON*

"Here. Who's there?"

"It's me."

The demon who split the room's door in half appeared .

"Ichika-kun. You were thinking of something rude just now, right?"

"Hahaha. That's not true, Tatenashi-san."

"Nn-. Oh well, I brought cream puffs over. Wanna have some?"

"Ah, okay. Please come in."

I led Tatenashi-san into my room.

The thick reference book's still laid out on the table, and Tatenashi-san looked over.

"Ah, Ichika-kun. Were you thinking of getting the maintenance branch to help out?"

"Ah, no, not me. I'm thinking of leaving Kanzashi-san's personal IS over to them."

"Uu—, that might be a little difficult."

Tatenashi-san said as she got up from the bed.

"What's that?"

"Kanzashi-chan, it seems like she wants to assemble her own unit herself."

"Huh?"

"She must be bothered that I did that before. There was no need to be mindful of that in the first place."

"Tatenashi-san...you assembled that machine on your own?"

"Huh? Sorta. I guess. I could do it since it was already 70% complete."

Wow...

She's not really Tabane-san number two, but this person's really outstandingly talented.

"But Kaoruko-chan gave me lots of suggestions. And Utsuho-chan was also present."

"Huh? Those two are of the maintenance branch?"

"Yup. The head of the third years and the elite of the second year."

Is-Is that so...

Let's not talk about Utsuho-san. I thought Mayuzumi-sempai was just a member of the newspaper club.

"Ichika-kun, you should let the maintenance branch check your IS. I saw the mock battle of the [Byakushiki]. The output of the thrusters don't match the gas reaction rate."

"Is-Is that so..."

Seeing Tatenashi-san take out the cream puff, I hurriedly moved off to prepare the red tea.

"Then how is it? About Kanzashi-chan."

"Uu—, I got hit."

"Huh?"

For some reason, Tatenashi-san looked shocked. While we're talking, the tea was ready.

"That kid probably wouldn't waste her strength on such a meaningless act..."

"Ah?"

"Did you touch her butt?"

"NO WAY!!"

"The breasts?"

"I SAY! WHY ARE YOU THINKING IN A SEXUAL HARASSING MANNER!?"

"Really, it can't be helped. If you say so, onee-san will let you touch hers."

"WAHH! WHY ARE YOU UNDRESSING! I-I'M-I'M GOING TO GET ANGRY!!"

"Ufufu, just kidding♪."

Re-Really...it's tiring...

"Here, have some. It's just a tea bag though."

"It'll be the world's most pleasurable taste if Ichika-kun gives me this."

"Saying such things again..."

"Yup, yup."

Really, this person's a lost cause.

"Speaking of which, that Kanzashi-chan...Ichika-kun, you're not interested in her?"

"Ah? You want me to go back after I got scolded?"

"Girls aren't good at refusing others, you know."

That's definitely a lie.

Using the simulated responses of the girls around me, if I'm to look for them after being scolded by them, such things will happen.

—If it's Houki.

"What. You want to be chopped up?"

Gya—

—If it's Rin.

"What do you mean? I'm going to kick you to death. Move aside! Really!"

Gya—

—If it's Cecilia.

"So you're the savage in your country...disappear right now."

Gya—

—If it's Laura."

"Do you know? Human brains can still run for a while after their heads are chopped off."

Gya—

—With Charl.

"..."

Gya—

Hey, it won't work at all!

"You're lying, Tatenashi-san."

"Is that so?"

Ahh, her attitude changed again.

"Anyway, you must work well with Kanzashi-chan. Also, you must assist her in the development of her IS."

"Is that an order...?"

"You like to be ordered around, right?"

"WHY DID IT END UP LIKE THAT!"

"Yaa~ don't be angry. I'm just joking."

...

"Mn, good tea. Thanks for your hospitality. I'll be going then."

Saying this (though there's a lot of cliché words), Tatenashi-san walked out of the room.

"Anyway, let's have some cream puffs..."

Ahh...nimble nimble.

"GU—!!?"

"Ahaha!! You got tricked! The cream was switched to mustard!"

I see Tatenashi-san's face smiling through the gap. There's a devil. The devil's here!

"TATENASHI-SAAANNNNN!!!"

"KYA~"

She closed the door and escaped.

I locked the door up, muttering five times in my heart not to open the door a second time.

"..."

Inside her own room, Kanzashi covered her head with her blanket to avoid being disturbed by her roommate as she continued to watch the TV.

The small holographic screen appeared in the air, perfectly showing how the hero today beat the evil organization.

Though she was watching this with an emotionless look, she was actually agitated.

Yes. She had always been like this.

(I beat him up...)

She managed to control herself the first time.

But for some reason, she got agitated the second time she met him and hit him.

(Why did I do that...)

It's true that it was Ichika's fault that her IS was incomplete.

But he didn't have any ill intent.

(Am...I acting spoiled...?)

Seeing others take the initiative, Kanzashi would always feel that she was spoilt.

Born in the Sarashiki family, she realized the difference in ability between her and her older sister as she grew up.

Their relatives often expected things from both of them as such, making her feel dejected. However, she never cried about this to anyone, and her heart had started to seal off.

It was supposed to be like this, or at least that was how it should have been.

(Orimura...Ichika...)

That guy's presence remained in her.

She remembered that kind smile.

"..."

A mysterious feeling swelled up in her heart, and Kanzashi's face was colored like a cherry.

The hero anime on the TV screen finally ended too.

"Hey!"

I moved forward with large strides to catch up with that person.

But on seeing that, that person increased her speed as she moved forward, almost looking like she was about to run.

"Wait up, Houki!"

"SHUT UP! DON'T CALL ME BY MY NAME! I WANT TO WORK ALONE!"

"Why... today's interview's supposed to be taken together. Of course it's better if we go together. And you may get lost anyway."

"Do-Don-Don't treat me like an idiot! How can I possibly get lost!"

By the way it's Sunday. We're on our way to the magazine editorial branch where Mayuzumi-sempai's older sister works.

Of course, Houki and I are in casual clothes, and also...

"Houki."

"Wha-What!?"

"That outfit's not bad. When did you buy it?"

"Ah, mn...well, it was...not long ago, when I went out with a friend..."

The black mini-skirt went with the white blouse, and there was a light autumn jacket over her. The bright color of dandelion looked really elegant.

"The decoration on the chest...well, it's not bad."

"Is-Is that so? I-It's true. I was really mindful of that."

"Ah, even though I normally imagine Houki in the kendo attire, you're really quite feminine now."

"Fu-Fuu. I-I'm not. Don't think that I'll be happy after your praised me."

Houki said that as she folded her arms and looked away. Whaat—and I finally praised you too.

"Ah, ahh..."

Both of us took large steps as we walked on.

"..."

"Hm? What's wrong, Houki? Why are you looking here?"

"No-Nothing!"

"Is that so?"

We continued walking with large strides.

"...You-Your clothing's, rath-rather cool looking too..."

"Hm? What did you say?"

"No-Nothing! Nothing at all! Yup! Hahaha!"

"?"

Houki's so weird.

"But it's a little chilly today. Want to get something from the convenience store over there?"

"Y-Yeah? No, wait, hold on...mmmm."

"?"

"If-If-If you're cold, can-can't we just hold hands?"

She sounded somewhat forceful, but Houki lowered her head and reached her hand out.

"Ah, that's good. Let's do it then."

"Ah!"

I grabbed Houki's hand and headed down the subway ticket gantry.

"Uu..."

Houki continued to remain silent until we reached the editorial branch.

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"Hello. I'm the deputy chief editor of [Infinite Stripes], Mayuzumi Nagisako. Glad to meet ya."

"He-Hello, I'm Orimura Ichika."

"I'm Shinonono Houki."

The room that was prepared for the interview was rather spacious, the three sofas that were as red as sliced tomatoes were arranged in a triangle.

"Well, we'll start with the interview, and then the photo shoot."

After saying that, she easily flipped the pen-shaped IC recorder.

Nagisako-san was dressed in a two-toned checkered suit, and the slender legs that extend out from her tight-fitting skirt were really beautiful.

"Then, I'm going to start with the questions. Ichika-kun , what are your thoughts of entering a girls school?"

"That's the first thing you ask...?"

"Can't be helped. People are wondering about that. According to the readers' feedback, there's a lot of people asking this."

"Well...I'm bothered that there are very few toilets to be used."

"GU! Aha, ahahaha! My sister told me before. Looks like it's true! The harem king who's not interested in the opposite gender!"

Ha-Harem king...

"Alright. Are there any permits to enter this kingdom?"

"ARE YOU DAN!?"[7B 2]

"Then, it's about Shinonono-san's onee-san—"

"..."

Houki stood up. Same as ever, anything about Tabane-san's a taboo subject to her.

"...I won't give you the dinner voucher, you know?"

"Uu!"

Houki again sat back on the sofa.

"Such a good kid. Ufufu, I like kids who're really honest...well, how do you feel about getting your personal unit from your older sister? Do you intend to be a representative cadet of a certain country? Do you hate Japan?"

"I'm grateful to be able to get [Akatsubaki]...right now, I have no intention of being a representative cadet even though I've received many invitations. As for Japan, well, I was born here, and grew up here, so I don't really hate it."

Houki continued to answer every single one of Nagisako-san's questions fully. As expected of her. She does everything seriously.

"Okay, okay, Ichika-kun and Shinonono-san, who's stronger?"

"Of course it's me!"

"Is that so?"

"Huh, well..."

Houki's chances of winning in a mock battle are slightly higher.

"Ahh, that's bad. How can you be a hero if you can't even beat a girl?"

Nagisako-san smiled but didn't say anything. Feeling bothered, I looked away.

"Well, I don't need to be a hero...I'm just a fighter."

"Oh, that's an excellent line. This sentence can make it into a movie."

She pointed her finger in a lens-shape as she continued to look at me and smile. Nagisako-san's really energetic like Kaoruko-san.

"Then, Orimura-taichou[7B 3]. Please tell everyone your feelings on the battlefield."

"We-Well..."

I secretly glanced at Houki.

If possible, I really don't want to say something embarrassing, but it can't be helped.

"I'll protect my friends!"

"YES! Nice going, man!"

It's unknown since when did I become a captain.

"Speaking of which, Orimura-kun belongs to the student council, right? Tatenashi-chan, she's really cool[7B 4], isn't she?"

Cute...I haven't heard that saying often recently.

"Of course not. She's making me suffer. I already have IS special training, and she still sends me to work with the other clubs."

"Ah, Kaoruko's complaining that you didn't go to the news club."

"Well, hm, that...I get snitched everytime."

"Ahh, it can't be helped then. Kaoruko was never born with luck. She drew handkerchiefs 20 times in a lucky draw and nearly didn't cry out."

Just like that, our random conversation ended, and now we're moving to the photo shoot.

"We're going to the photography room underground. There's a changing room there, so just change your clothes there. We'll take photos once you're done with the make-up.

"Ah? We need to change clothes too?"

"Yup. My head will roll if you don't wear the sponsors' clothing."

Saying that, she used her head to imitate the action of her head being sliced off.

Ahh...adults really have it tough...

"Then, let's go!"

Entering a different changing room from Ichika, Houki couldn't see the clothes that was to be changed into as she folded both hands in front of her.

"Ahh..."

She sighed and blushed as red as a cherry.

('I'll protect Houki!' Huh? That guy, really!)

Secretly chuckling and knocking on the wall wildly, the white wall bent in slightly after 4 heavy hits.

Considering everything to be beneficial to her and missing the point, it seems that the teenage express went berserk and couldn't stop.

"That's right...that's right...! Ufufu, ufufufufu!"

Holding this model clothing, Houki suddenly realized that the design of the clothing was really daring.

"Uu...thi-this..."

The blouse exposed a lot of the cleavage, and that's topped off with a cute miniskirt and a short-sleeved leather coat.

(Do-Do-Do I have to wear this!? Me-Me!? Of all people !?)

The clothing that Houki would never choose no matter what was right in front of her, and she was all petrified now.

(No, but, uu...thi-this may be a good chance...)

I want to show Ichika that I can go well with such clothing.

Such thoughts lingered in Houki. Two minutes later, she decided.

"Okay! I'm going to wear it!"

Houki clenched her fists and fiercely undid the buttons of her blouse.

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(I-Isn't Ichika done? If that's the case, this delicate fleeting feeling makes me unable to calm down.)

Sitting on the chair in the photography room, Houki felt somewhat anxious as she twisted about.

As a side note, her make-up was done by a professional cosmetician, and the light make-up created a dazzling beauty. The male assistants and cameramen that were in the room were staring at Houki, and felt really hot.

(I-If Ichika praises me, we'll be eating outside. I-I'll invite him. And I...I'll...)

Repeating these words in her mind like a spell, she heard the footsteps coming out from the dressing room.

"Sorry for being late. Ichika-kun, please enter."

Her heart started to beat.

(I-Ichika's here...Ichika's here...)

Houki couldn't remain calm any longer as she started to tug at her hair meaninglessly.

"Uu, isn't this weird?"

--Ichika's voice!

Houki's heart pounded even crazily.

"Of course not! It really suits you. Even for a teenager, it's stylish to wear a suit."

(Su-Suit!?)

At her own limit now, Houki decided to turn to where Ichika was.

"Ahh..."

Standing there was Ichika in a casual suit. In Houki's eyes, through the lens of a girl in love, the image shown was, so, so cool! It just looked great to her.

"I-Ichika..."

"O-Ohh. Sorry to keep you waiting, Houki."

"Uu, uu..."

She couldn't say anything as she got nervous.

Houki continued to play with her fingers, and finally formed her sentence and muttered.

"It-It really suits you...well, I say. It's not weird."

"O-Ohh. Thank you Houki. Well...that's rather cute."

"Cu-Cute—!?"

With her heart pounding like crazy, Houki's face was blushing with a fever. She closed her eyes to restrain this heat.

(I-Ichika praised me...Ichika praised me...)

Patting her hand on her face, she felt the heat.

Houki lowered her head and turned her back on Ichika to prevent him from seeing her looking so abnormal.

"Okay. We'll begin the photo shoot. Time's short, so let's finish this at one go!"

Nagisako-san clapped her hands. The workers answered 'Yes', and they finally started the photo shoot.

(That really shocked me...)

During the photo shoot at the booth, Houki and I started making these kind of poses.

I tried my best not to look at Houki as I continued to pose for the photos.

(Unexpectedly, Houki changed a lot...the make-up's really great.)

When I saw her for the first time, I thought I mistook her for someone else due to that dazzle.

Not to mention the daring outfit that showed the cleavage and those revealing thighs made me panic.

(Houki wouldn't wear those kinds of outfits no matter what...)

Is that accidental, or is it a gap in expectations... anyway, it caused my heart to pound. How cute, I thought honestly.

(What's going on? There's an adult feeling not like usual. This is...)

I really can't find a suitable expression to describe her.

Anyway, my heart is racing. Better not exchange looks with Houki.

"Ichika-kun, please move closer to Shinonono-san. A little closer."

Nagisako-san suddenly said that.

I hesitated, but I still moved towards Houki, who was sitting on the same sofa.

"Er, erm, can this do?"

"Ahh—, no no. Closer, closer!"

"Huh!? No, but, if I get closer..."

I secretly glanced at Houki.

I originally thought that she would be angry at me, but unexpectedly, she rolled her eyes up at me and gave me a gentle expression to invite me in.

(Uu!?)

Since when did the Houki I know become so cute? I knew that already, but that's not fair.

I tried my best to calm the throbbing in my heart as I sat beside Houki.

"Ah~..."

Houki's arm got touched slightly, and she let out an unbelievably cute sound.

DOKI! My heart started to throb again.

"Mn~, sitting together like this still doesn't look good. Orimura-kun, hold Shinonono-san around the waist.

"...Wha?"

"Hold—her—by—the—waist. Hurry!"

"O-Okay!"

Nagisako-san suddenly spoke sternly, which surprised me, and I had to answer. What should I do?

(Well, a hand around the back of the waist. This hand, that...)

Somewhat panicking, I moved towards Houki to make it easier for me to grab her by the waist.

The moment I touched her body, wow...the sweet vanilla perfume spread out.

"!!"

I can feel my heart beating wildly, and in the midst of that, I used my trembling hand to grab Houki's waist.

"Ah..."

Houki let out a little whimper. The light dash of pink gloss on her lips looked like they were about to suck me in, and the breath that came from her mouth felt so bewitching.

(Calm-Calm down, calm down...)

This sentence echoed in my mind, and I inadvertently swallowed my saliva.

"Mn, it's not bad, but I want it to have more impact."

Moving her face away from the camera, Nagisako-san folded her arms in front of her chest and looked up.

"Okay. Let's have Shinonono-san hug Ichika-kun's head with both hands. Wouldn't that carry a lot of impact ? Mn, okay. That's good!"

PACHN! The sound echoed throughout the room.

"Alright, let's do it!"

Nagisako-san smiled.

(Wait, isn't that too...)

Thinking about this, I turned to Houki. Our eyes met in a distance less than 10cm away.

"Ahh..."

We saw each other, Houki and me.

For some reason, it felt like time stopped at that moment, and both Houki and I didn't move.

(Houki's eyes are beautiful...)

The eyes that never changed since we were young were brimming with strength, but it's different now.

I don't know how to express this in words, but Houki had a hidden side that I didn't know of.

And no matter what, it intoxicated me.

"..."

Kashan!

The flash of light caused Houki and I to recover.

"Mnn~, that's a nice photo. Looks like there's no need to put the hands away."

"Th-This..."

"..."

Houki and I got embarrassed at that moment and quickly separated like a spring.

"..."

"..."

I don't know whether she understood our silence there , but Nagisako-san gave us a 'Really, you guys' smile, and earnestly gave us a thumbs up to tell us, good job.

"That's all! Good work! Next, you two can change clothes. Oh yeah, we'll give you these clothes, so just take them back!"

"I-I see..."

"Okay."

Houki and I answered ambiguously as we headed off in opposite directions.

"Then, I'll send you the data of the dinner voucher through phone. Please remember to tell me your e-mail address before you leave. That's all. It's been a tough day. "

It's not just Kaoruko-san herself, even Nagisako-san's footsteps were so light. She had already started to transfer the data in the camera, and was using the Mobile Client to check.

"Th-Then, Houki."

"Wha-What's the matter?"

"Le-Let's go change."

"Ah, yeah."

Houki and I continued to maintain this delicate distance between us as we had this stiff conversation. We headed off to our changing rooms.

"..."

"..."

Of course, we remained silent on the way.

Anyway, let's fan off that heat on my face.

(He-He praised me...Ichika praised me...he said that I was cute...)

Taking off her clothes in the changing room, Houki stared at herself who was only wearing her underwear and holding onto her own clothes.

Clenching her fists tightly, the white blouse that was covering the huge cleavage seemed to be pondering.

(And...not only that...)

The sensation she experienced when both of them exchanged looks floated up in Houki's head, dying her face red completely.

(Looking at each other at such a close distance...)

At that time, she was so nervous her heart was about to rip open, and now it was giving off a delighted sensation.

The distance where they could feel each others' warmth and breathing like lovers looking at each other and hugging made Houki's heart race.

(I-If, we're alone...)

The image of her kissing with Ichika unfolded in her mind.

"Nn..."

She closed her eyes and let her fingertips move across her lips.

It was a feeling that took the breath away from people, but it also gave her a sense of guilt that she shouldn't have done that.

(--Okay.)

She opened her eyes that were showing determination.

(I'll treat him to dinner on our way back. Are there any good restaurants nearby...)

Thinking about it, she searched through her memory.

(Oh yeah! My roommate Shizune borrowed a book that mentioned that name. Let's go there then. I remember it should be near the subway when we're about to go back.)

Remembering that the restaurant had the huge tagline 'Top 10 amongst the most popular restaurants for couples', Houki's face started to heat up again.

(I can definitely do it today...calm down, invite him. Mn.)

Repeating these words over and over again, Houki finally recovered and continued changing.

She was smiling brightly, either because of embarrassment or happiness.

...

.....

.....

On the way back, Houki and Ichika were walking together side by side.

Both of them were carrying the clothes they wore for the photo shoot today in the bags.

"We-Well, that was a refreshing experience."

Perhaps somewhat aware that Houki's of the opposite gender, Ichika stuttered.

"Is-Is that so? That can be a kind of life experience."

Just like that, both of them continued with their unnecessary conversation as they headed down the stairs leading to the subway.

(Okay...I'm going to say it, I'm going to say it now...!)

Patting her hand hard on her chest, Houki decided to say it out.

"I-Ichika, well, how about we have dinner...well, erm, together..."

"Hm? Okay. But the cafeteria's still open now."

"No, it's not like that! Not in the cafeteria...well...out, outside, together..."

"Ah, outside? I see."

Ichika let out a 'mn' sound and started to ponder.

Houki stared at Ichika, and felt that the waiting time was really long.

"Alright then. It's rare to go out anyway. Let's go then."

"! I-I see...o-okay."

Houki's face suddenly dazzled, and she looked happy and yet embarrassed.

"Then, where will we go eat? How about the family restaurant in front of the station?"

"No-No! I know of a good place. Let's go there then."

"Oh, I understand."

Making a "Do your best" gesture in her heart, Houki started to get excited because she believed that she had won.

But...

"Ah, we're full today."

This sort of thing does happen at dinner time on Sundays, and the restaurant that magazine advertised, 'Coniferous Forest'[7B 5], is fully packed with customers.

And this place was basically filled with couples which made Houki even more sad.

"What now? It says here that we have to wait for two hours...how about we head back to the cafeteria?"

"No-No need! We'll just eat outside! O-Outside!"

(Bu-But what do we do? Amongst the other restaurants I know of, the rest include family restaurants, the eateries on the street at the shopping mall in front of the station and the ramen houses...)

But these restaurants wouldn't fit the mood she wanted.

Anyway, feeling really determined, Houki started to look through the information on the magazine.

(The 2nd rank stop's opposite the station...the 3rd one is too far away from here...erm, the 4th...)

Houki, who was troubled, had her hand raised by Ichika.

"Ah, I know of a good shop. Let's go."

(WA-WAAA!? MY-MY-MY HAND...I-ICHIKA, HE'S HOLDING ONTO IT...!?)

DOKI!! Her heart pounded intensively. It felt like her heart was about to pop out.

"From now on, we have to walk quite a bit. Any problem with that?"

"Ah, ah...whatever you say..."

Anyway, as she was concentrating on Ichika's hand, Houki could only answer blankly.

"..."

Having her hand held by Ichika, Houki's heart fluttered as she followed him from half a step behind.

This continued for more than 20 minutes, and they finally reached that shop.

"It's here."

"U-Un?"

Looking forward to a romantic eatery, Houki was stunned by the one in front of her.

"Gotanda's Eatery...?"

"Yup. I mentioned it before, right? It's my friend's house."

"I-I see..."

Houki's shoulders dropped dejectedly, but thinking about it carefully, this is Ichika we are talking about. It's possible for him to fulfill her expectations.

Haa...after sighing for a while, she entered the shop with Ichika.

"Oh, Dan."

"Huh!? Isn't that Ichika!?"

Half of the seats in the shop were taken. It was likely that Dan had to help out in his own shop, as he's serving food with an apron on.

"Hn? You brought a girl with you today?...Do-Don't tell me it's your girlfriend!?"

"Why do you look so happy?"

"No-Nothing...well, that's your girlfriend, right!?"

"Nope. Didn't I tell you in middle school. She's my childhood friend, the first one. Didn't you notice her at my birthday party?"

"Idiot. Do you know how much effort I spent asking for Utsuho-san's address..."

"What about Utsuho-san?"

"Ahem. Nothing at all. Oh yeah, ah, that. Shinono-san?"

Un, un, as Dan tried his best to remember her name while putting his folded arms in front of his chest, Houki finally answered.

"Shinonono Houki."

"Fuu, yes, I'm Gotanda Dan. Nice to meet you."

"Ah, ahh."

Houki suddenly remembered about Gotanda Ran, and started to feel wary.

(That Ichika. Maybe he came here to look for that kid...)

Thinking about this, Houki was led to her seat.

"Then, call me when you are decided on what to eat."

After that, Dan returned to the counter.

Houki read through the menu, and at the same time, initiated a conversation with Ichika.

"Do-Do you have any special recommendations?"

"Hm? Each one of them is good. If I have to choose one , it's the fish-based set meal...ah, the curry here's nice too. "

"I-I see. Fuu..."

Though she said that, she couldn't help but continue to be mindful that 'Ran may come over'.

"Ah—well...ahem! I-Ichika?"

"Hm?"

Looking at the same menu, Ichika answered.

"We-Wel-Well..."

Say it! Just say it! I need to try my best!

...Well, though she tried to encourage herself in her heart, she still couldn't pull the trigger.

(Buck up, Shinonono Houki! What happened to that usual confidence?)

--O-Okay! I'm going to say it, say it! Say it out!

"SPE-SPEAKING OF WHICH, ICHIKA!"

"? What's wrong? Why so loud out of a sudden?"

"No-Nothing...sorry."

It seems that she was too forceful as the surrounding customers were all shocked.

Ichika continued to look at Houki, who was backing away in guilt, and said,

"Speaking of which, since the time you started going back to the kendo club, your figure's really good, Houki. Well, your posture's really straight, and the curve of the back is really elegant."

"Is-Is that so? Than-Thank you..."

Backing away, Houki continued to drink the water down in large gulps.

--Again, again, go me, go.

"I-Ichika."

"Hm?"

"Ah...that..."

Looking up, their faces met again, and Houki started to panic again.

--SAY IT!

"It-It's just that. Right now, I'm practicing how to cook, so if you don't mind, I'd like to let you try it the next time ..."

--ARRRGGHHH!! WHAT AM I SAYING!

"Oh, is that so? Houki's cooking's great. I'll try it to my heart's content next time."

"O-Okay! O...yeah...yeah!"

Seeing Ichika smile so happily, Houki nodded her head as her ponytail swayed. She looked really happy too.

"Then, I'll order the Grilled Fish and fries set. What about you, Houki?"

Completely forgetting to order, Houki frantically turned to look at the menu.

"Mn, this Fried Wildfire Roasted Vegetable set looks good too. It's a specialty of theirs too...and the hotplate menu..."

"I see. Then, that'll be all."

Forgetting everything about Ran, Houki enjoyed the time she had alone with Ichika.

"Hey, Dan--, can you take our order now?"

"Coming."

"I want a grilled fish with fries set meal, and Houki wants the Wildfire Roasted Vegetables."

"Okay, got it. Please hold on for a moment."

After jotting down the order, Dan moved off into the kitchen.

--In the meantime, the owner of the Gotanda Eatery, Dan's grandfather, Gen saw Ichika over there.

"Hn? Ichika's over there!"

"Ah, that's right. You old devil."

"Oh. Wait, wait, is that his girlfriend? GAHAHA!"

"No, I guess that's not the case."

"HEY!! RAN!! HEEY!!!"

Gen shouted out loudly at the main house. A while later, a 'what-?' could be heard from the second level.

"COME DOWN TO THE SHOP! IT'S URGENT!"

"WHY—?"

"JUST COME DOWN!"

Ran's grandfather Gen shouted back at the roof loudly. Two minutes later, Ran moved from the main house to the entrance of the eatery.

On a side note, she was attracting a lot of attention with her looks even though she was in casual clothes.

"What's the matter, grandpa? I'm still doing my assignments—u, huuh!? Ichika-san!?"

"Yo."

"GAHAHAHA!!"

Gotanda Gen, who was laughing away heartily, suddenly stopped moving his hands that were cooking.

Ran compared her dress with Ichika and Houki, who were sitting opposite him, and rushed out of the entrance .

"WAAAAHHH!!"

"What? Hey, Dan. What's wrong with Ran!?"

"...Gramps, Ran's going to be mad at you later..."

"Ah? Why must she be angry with me?"

"Dad, it's time to continue working."

Saying that as she walked out was Dan's mother, Ren, the self-proclaimed lady boss of the Gotanda Eatery.

"Ara ara?[7B 6] Ichika-kun, is the girl with you your girlfriend?"

"I said she's not already."

"Is that so? That's good."

Ren showed a smile, and Ichika smiled wryly, not knowing what to do.

Ten minutes after that—

"We-Welcome, Ichika-san..."

Ran finally walked out. She was wearing something that looked like an apron.

Also, as the real poster girl appeared, all the men in the shop rioted.

"Huh? What's up, Ran. You got changed?"

"Y-Yes, well..."

"Are you going to go out now? It's quite late already."

"Wh-What's wrong with that!? Well, it's just my mood!
"

Secretly glancing at Houki, Ran's confidence started to shrink further

(I still can't beat her...)

Most likely, it's because of the breasts.

(Uu...)

Ignoring Ran's delicate feelings as a girl, someone loudly called out Ran's name.

"HEY, RAN! THE FOOD'S DONE. HURRY UP AND SERVE UP."

"I-I GOT IT! DON'T BE SO LOUD, GRANDPA!"

Taking up the food at the counter, Ran turned around to look.

"Humph!"

"What...? Hey, Dan. You, what did you do to make her angry?"

"I DIDN'T !"

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO SHOUT BACK AT ME LIKE THAT!"

"AHH! WHY MUST IT BE ME! IT'S YOUR FAULT, GRANDPA! YOUR FAULT!"

Grandfather and grandson continued to bicker, and beside them, Ren waved her hand lightly to encourage her.

"So-Sorry to keep you waiting, I-Ichika-san."

"Oh, thanks."

She put Ichika's set meal down, and returned back to the counter to get Houki's.

"So-Sorry to keep you waiting...erm, it's been a long time."

"Mn, it's been a long time. Thanks."

Just like that, Ichika and Houki put down their dishes.

...Beside them, Ran continued to look at them, not moving at all.

(Wh-Why are both of them alone together...are-are they on a da-date?...uu, what should I do...)

Seeing Ran standing there blankly, Ichika opened his mouth and said.

"Ran? What's with you?"

"Wha, ah!? I didn't do anything!?"

"No, well...we can't really eat with you staring at us like that."

"Ah, ye-yes! I see! Aha-Ahaha, pardon me for my rudeness."

Ran slipped back into the kitchen. Ichika continued to stare at Ran strangely as he and Houki split the one-use chopsticks.

"Then, itadakimasu."

"Itadakimasu."

Both of them put their palms together, and after that, reached their chopsticks out.

"It's salmon today. Yup, it's good."

On the other side, Houki let out a 'oo' sound as she continued to chew on the Wildfire Roasted Vegetables.

"This...it's really good. I can taste the soy sauce in the vegetables."

"Yeah. That's really good."

"Do-Do you want to try some?"

"Is that good? Then I'll quickly—"

Saying that, Ichika reached his chopsticks out at Houki's plate. Ahem. Houki stopped him.

"I-I'll feed you..."

"Ah? Huh?"

"I-I SAID THAT I'LL FEED YOU!"

'"O-Oh..."

Held back by the sudden raise in volume, Ichika hesitated. Anyway, he nodded his head first.

Houki used her chopsticks to pick the meat and vegetables, and then used the left hand to bring it to Ichika's mouth.

"Here, ah~..."

"Ah~..."

"AAAHHHHH!!!"

Just when Ichika was about to eat it, a voice louder than Houki's echoed throughout the Gotanda's Eatery.

...It was Ran's voice.

"I'm telling you. Ichika got that girl already, so just give—AH!"

BAM! Putting his hand on Ran's shoulder, Dan tried to advise her, only to be stepped on the foot by Ran fiercely, and cringing in pain.

"Ah, ah. My fault—a-an."

"UUUU!!!"

Ran suddenly cried out. At that moment, the other customers seemed to be discussing about something, and there was quite the ruckus.

"What's with this?"

"Is it because of that young man?"

"Making Ran-chan cry!? UNFORGIVABLE!"

"THAT'S RIGHT!"

The male customers started to talk loudly, and Gen silenced them with a 'BE QUIET!'. Meanwhile, Houki was troubled due to the stares everyone was giving her. Now she can't do the 'Here, ah' thing again.

(WHY-WHY MUST IT ALWAYS BE LIKE THIS EVERY SINGLE TIME! EVERY, SINGLE TIME!)

Gugugu...the chopsticks that were being held tight sounded like they were about to break.

"Houki."

"What!?"

"Ah~"

She ate it.

Houki ate the fried prawn Ichika picked up for her in reflex.

"Well, the fried stuff's good too. Most likely, the way to cook it is really skillful."

"I-I see...that's true..."

Eating the fried prawn in large bites, Houki quickly swallowed the food and answered.

At that moment, Ran was standing behind the counter, glaring angrily at Ichika in tears, but Ichika didn't notice this stare as it was unfortunately too far away.

(I-Ichika fed me something...Ichika fed me something...)

Her heart pounding wildly, Houki's unable to control it as her face went completely red.

"The-Then, try some of the fried meat and vegetables."

Ignoring the chopsticks that were about to break, Houki picked it up and slowly picked up a portion of the Wildfire Roasted Vegetables.

Ah~...he ate it.

"Mn. Ngh ngh..."

"..."

Houki continued to stare at Ichika who was eating the Wildfire Roasted Vegetables. It wasn't something she

cooked, but it couldn't be helped that she had this reaction.

"It's good!"

"Ye-Yeah!"

Houki's face suddenly bloomed like fresh floweres.

Both of them then continued to eat their own dishes, and Ran finally decided to move to the table.

"Eeeeeeeerrrrmmmm, doooooo yoooouuu neeed water ..."

"Mn, thank you."

Ran took the glass cup with her trembling hand and poured water from the pot.

But the shocking image was still etched in her mind, unable to be shaken off, and she inadvertently splattered water all over the place.

"Wa!? Wha-What's wrong, Ran!? Are you alright?"

"Eeeeeehhhhh, iiiiiiiitttt's nothing, aha-ahahahaha..."

Her hand trembled even more as she poured water out for Houki, and large teardrops appeared in her eyes.

"Hey, Ran?"

"No-Nothing...nothing at all..."

Though Ran said that as she continued to wipe her tears and force the smile, her tears just continued to well up.

"Wha-What's wrong!?"

"U...UEEEEEEEEEHHH!!!"

Ichika got completely stunned, as he watched Ran dash out of the eatery.

"Wha-What's going on. Suddenly...sorry Houki. I've got to go out for a while."

Anyway, I've got to follow her. Ichika thought as he stood up. At that moment, several strong men stood up and blocked his exit.

"Murakami Shinzaburou, 42 years old, construction worker!"

"Yamamoto Juukura, 39 years old, civil engineer!"

"Yoshioka Shuichi, 47 years old, driver!"

"Terada Katsumi, 34 years old, Serviceman!"

"Chris Marcus, 29 years old, self-employed!"

The five men band suddenly announced their names and created a pose together. It seemed that the special effects of flames could be seen behind them.

"WE'RE THE RAN-CHAN FANCLUB ALLIANCE!"

"I-I see..."

"SO GO AND DIE!"

The five of them rushed up, but they were stopped by Gen's powerful arm.

"Huh, Gen-san..."

"Yo, Ichika...chase after her."

At that moment, Gen's veins started to pop out on his face. Since his cute granddaughter was made to cry, it couldn't be helped that he was raging.

"Ha-Haha...hahaha..."

Though the action hadn't ended, it was better to announce the weather report first.

As the grandfather's rage was completely burning, there would be a bloody maelstrom in the nearby area. People who were intending to go out, please make sure not to get involved.

"Fugu...uuu..."

At a swing in a nearby park, Ran was alone, and dejected.

Her face was still full of tears up till now, and her eyes were all red now.

(Uu...Ichika-san's, he's going out with Houki-san...)

Creak...*creak*...the swing swayed about lifelessly, just like how Ran was feeling right now.

"Haa..."

Sighing, she took out the ticket from her purse.

It was an invitational ticket for the school festival of the traditional ojou-sama school[7B 7], Saint Marianne School, where Ran studied.

(I wanted to give this to Ichika-san...)

It's now a reality that can't happen anymore. Thinking about this, Ran wanted to use both hands to rip this ticket forcefully.

"Heey! Ran~!"

"Huh...? I-Ichika-san...?"

Seeing Ichika run over here while panting, Ran hurriedly released both hands and tried to hide the ticket she was about to rip behind her.

"Haa, haa, haa...so you were here..."

"I-Ichika-san, why..."

"Haa...haa...either way, I was worried since you ran off just like that."

Adjusting his erratic breathing, Ichika looked up.

His face looked like he got beaten badly, and it's all swollen.

"I-Ichika-san!? Your face, what happened!?"

"Ah!? It's nothing, well...I just fell. Hahaha."

Ran immediately realized that he was lying, and naturally thought that her grandfather did it.

"So-Sorry! It was all my fault..."

"Hm? Why?"

"Be...Because..."

He left Houki behind, and got beaten by grandpa. Even so, Ichika still ran out to look for Ran, and Ran was really touched by Ichika's gestures.

The sadness disappeared like it was a lie. At the same time, emotions welled up in her.

(I-Ichika-san's really kind...)

DOKI DOKI! The heartbeat sounded loudly in her heart. Ran could feel this agitated sensation of pain in her as she held both hands tightly together.

(May-Maybe I can say it out now...)

Deciding this, Ran forcefully sucked in her lips and lifted her head up.

"We-Well, Ichika-san!"

"Yeah."

"Th-This! If you don't mind, please read it!"

Saying that, she handed over the Saint Marianne School anniversary ticket.

"Hm? Ah, Ran's school is having its school anniversary ?"

"Ye-Yes."

Ichika checked the date of the event. Huh? He thinks.

(This day. I think it's the same date as the dinner voucher I got from Mayuzumi-san...)

Ichika pondered.

(But it doesn't matter. The school festival will end before nightime.)

Thinking that, he decided to accept the invitation.

"Thank you. I'm keeping this then. I'll definitely come over."

"Ye-Yes! Aaaa, errrmm, that day, I'll, ah, lead the way! I'll guide you through. Can you give me a call once you reach the school?"

"Hm? Aren't you the Student Council President, Ran? Won't you be busy that day?"

"No no! It's alright! No problem! Everyone in the Student Council's outstanding!"

It's alright for me not to show myself! Ran said that as she stood upright.

"Really. I'll call you then."

"O-Okay!"

Seeing the radiant smile on her face, Ichika relaxed.

He didn't know the reason, but he was mindful that she was crying because of him.

On the other hand, as for Ran, her face that was full of tears was now showing delight.

(It's great, it's great, it's great! This is the school festival date I always dreamt of! It's really great!)

A ticket per person. It's every girl's wish in Saint Marianne school to invite their boyfriends, and Ran's maiden heart fluttered.

Of course, there will be a strict inspection by her female friends, but Ran was confident about it, thinking ' There won't be any problems if it's Ichika-san!'.

Besides, since he's 'The only guy in the entire world who can use IS', the Japanese government relaxed the restrictions, and he's often seen on magazines or TV adverts.

A while back, Ran was talking to her friends that she went out with Ichika. She chuckled when she remembered how everyone was so envious of her, and started laughing.

(Ehehe, I'm going to hold hands with him and walk around the school...ehe, eheh...♪)

"Then, let's go back."

"O-Okay."

Bringing the smiling Ran along, Ichika headed towards the Gotanda Eatery.

That night, Ran couldn't sleep at all due to overexcitement.

Chapter 3: Open your Heart!

It had been past a week since Ichika started looking for Kanzashi.

"Hey, pair up with me."

"Absolutely, not..."

As it happened everyday, news that Ichika was chasing Kanzashi non-stop soon spread.

"Hey hey, did you hear that?"

"I heard that Orimura-kun's trying to get closer to Sarashiki-san of Class 4."

"Huuh? That's a lie, right!? Why, why!?"

"I'm not really sure, but it seemed that Orimura-kun chose Sarashiki-san as his partner in the personal IS tag match."

"Huh, what about the rest?"

"Well, about that, how should I put it..."

–Cecilia Alcott's situation:

"Ichika-san...I'll make you regret for not pairing up with me. Fu, ufufu, fufufufu."

The [Starlight MKIII] and the four BITs fired out at the same time. As they were in [Polarized Shooting] trajectory, Cecilia shot down all the moving targets.

"Tremble to your heart's content under the Requiem that's played by me, Cecilia Alcott, and [Blue Tears]."

–Huang Lingyin's situation:

"I want my right shoulder part to be replaced with a spread [Impact Cannon], send me the package data of the piercing [Impact Cannon] on the left side. Also, [Souten Gagetsu]'s to be changed into a spear. Change the [Impact Cannons] on the wrists to a high voltage chain! To be done in three days—ha? Can't do it? DO IT EVEN IF YOU CAN'T! GET TO WORK!"

After sending a one-sided message to the person in charge of manufacturing her armaments in her own country, Rin fired the [Ryuuhou] at maximum output.

The ground exploded majestically, leaving a large crater in the arena.

"Watch this, Ichika...I won't forgive you even if you beg me for forgiveness!"

"Kukuku." Clenching her fist tightly, Rin's eyes were burning with battle intent.

–Charlotte Dunois' situation:

"Zzst—haa—"

Looking down from 200m above the central tower, there were 57 targets on the perimeter. They were all auto-fire mock-battle types.

"Let's go, [Revive]!"

Swoosh! Charlotte quickly swooped down. She was holding onto two large and long .59 caliber heavy machine guns [Desert Fox]es, one in each hand.

"..."

Not decelerating but accelerating, Charlottle swung the heavy machine guns and shot down her targets.

CLUNK! Once she used up her bullets, Charlotte threw her guns away and summoned a pair of Assault Blades.

Charlotte continued to maintain her maximum speed as she flew down to the ground in a straight line.

She continued to slice up all the targets in her path as she quickly approached the ground.

–HAAAAA!!

Just when she was about to crash hard into the ground , Charlotte did a 180 degree turn, using the thrusters on her feet to support her body. With that, she crossed her arms and threw the two blades in her hands, hitting the last target nicely.

"I'm a strong opponent here, Ichika."

Charlotte smiled. That angelic smile however was giving off an absolute zero-like freezing air.

–Laura Bodewig's situation:

Creak...*creak*...Laura was sitting on the bed of the changing room as she sharpened her knife.

Then, she raised the knife to check it.

The thing that was sharpened until it was glittering like a mirror was a sharp weapon that could cut off flesh on the slightest contact.

"...Ha."

Seeing her face reflected on the blade, a smile appeared on Laura's face.

(Instructor rejected me, and I couldn't pair up with Ichika. What was I doing...)

If it has come to this...

Black flames lit up in Laura's body.

(I'll show you. I'll let real terror strike your body, Ichika!)

KLANG! The knife that was thrown out went into Ichika's photo that was in her locker.

"I'll win! After I win, I'll make you completely mine, Ichika!"

Laura stood up and clenched her fist. There was no sign of hesitation in her eyes.

(That's right. Get ready, Ichika!)

Laura's eyes gazed sternly at the photo in the locker.

–Ah.

Looking closely, the knife pierced viciously into Ichika's forehead on the photo.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

It was the only photo she had. However, Laura completely forgot that she bought the negatives as she turned completely pale. She gingerly raised the photo that had a hole opened in it with both hands.

(I-I-I finally got this. It was the only photo in the world ...)

She paid 200,000 yen to get the priority to choose at the photo auction Mayuzumi Kaoruko organized.

And she even bought the photo of the Ichika she liked, together with the negatives.

–That's not too bad.

But it was too late even if she thought of that. She had burned the negatives because she was afraid that others would duplicate it. In other words, this was really the only existing photo of Ichika in the world, the one that Laura liked the most. And this one photo now had a hole ripped through it viciously by the knife.

"D-Duct tape...if I use duct tape, maybe..."

Though Laura frantically rummaged through her locker, she only had military rations, prepared IS suits, knives, knives, knives and more knives.

"Huh..."

Forcefully poking out her face from the locker, Laura screamed loudly.

"MEDIC!! MEEEDDDDDIIIICCCC!!!!"

Her eyes were completely teary, and it most likely wasn't just a feeling.

...Either way, Ichika had been treated cruelly like an enemy by the girls with the personal ISes.

And as for the last important character, Shinonono Houki—

"Houki-chan get!"

"WAAH!? Wh-Wha-What's going on, Sarashiki—san!?"

After school, she was caught by Tatenashi while doing Iaido[7C 1] training in the kendo dojo.

"Ah hun, call me Tatenashi."

"Ta-Tatenashi-san. Is something the matter? I'm doing self-training."

"Ha, Iaido with real swords? You're going for real."

"Yeah, sort of. I'm a descendant of a family that went through the Sengoku Era[7C 2] after all."

"Really? Okay, I understand. Houki-chan, pair up with me!"

"What!?"

"Please! I-It's unbearable that no one wants to pair up with me."

"I see, alright..."

Tatenashi put her palms together and begged. Seeing Tatenashi like that, Houki was so troubled that she couldn't look back at her coldly.

"Okay?"

"Well, this, if that's the case, I don't really mind..."

"Really? That's great. Houki-chan's so kind."

Tatenashi's face went from troubled to delighted as she gave a radiant smile.

(Uu...! I-I got fooled, huh...?)

Just when Houki was wondering about that, Tatenashi grabbed Houki's hand and walked out.

"Come on, let's go. Let's do it!"

"Whe-Where are we going?"

"The checkup room. I want to see Houki-chan's biometrics."

"Whaa..."

"Oh my. Isn't this important? IS have an auto-adjust mechanism, but it's not good to do these adjustments without the latest figures."

"I-I see."

Understanding Tatenashi's smooth explanation, Houki found herself in front of the checkup room.

"Open sesame!"

As she said that, Tatenashi touched the switch on the door. *Phoosh*. The sound of compressed air being released could be heard, and the door opened diagonally.

"Then, I'll operate this. Houki-chan, please stand on the scanning area."

"Okay."

Summoning the control panel, Tatenashi began to prepare the data scan.

During this time, Houki wiped her sweat off with the towel on her neck.

"Okay, I'm ready. How are you feeling, Houki-chan?"

"I'm okay here."

"O-kay, let's begin."

Beep, *beep*. The keyboard was tapped, and the scanner floated up from below Houki's feet, shooting out an intensive green light on her body.

"Hm, this is..."

"Is there a problem?"

"Houki-chan's breasts are really big. Maybe I lose by a notch."

"WH-WHERE ARE YOU LOOKING AT!?"

"Ahaha. Sorry, sorry."

"Do it seriously! Really..."

After that, Tatenashi never said anything strange to tease Houki. About 2 minutes later, the checkup was complete.

"Then, I'll send the data to [Akatsubaki]. There will be a certain level of auto-adjustments, but you have to do the rest yourself...oh yeah. I'll explain those things to you before the tournament starts, okay?"

"Mn, okay. I don't have a reason to refuse."

"Fufu, Houki-chan, you're cute when you're being honest, you know?"

"Pl-Please stop teasing me! The-Then, I'll say goodbye for today."

"Mn. Good job."

After leaving the checkup room, Houki had an inexplicable feeling.

(Why is it...that I don't hate her for saying that...)

Normally speaking...if it were someone else, she would resist that person no matter what.

But for some reason, she accepted Tatenashi's words.

This inexplicable feeling wasn't something she was unhappy about. Engulfed in this emotion, Houki walked to the bathroom in a good mood.

"..."

Tatenashi was still in the checkup room.

Opening several display screens to compare the data, her expression became extremely serious.

(What's going on...)

On the left side, Houki's personal biometrics from when she entered the Academy were displayed. Her physical ability was top-notch like now, but the most important 'IS compatibility' was rated at **C**

"..."

Tatenashi then turned to the display screen on the right side. It's the latest biometrics she just got, and over there, the 'IS compatibility' was rated with the letter **S**

(The biggest factor in the compatibility was that the pilot had to be born with it. Of course, the compatibility would naturally increase through training and synchronizing with the IS...)

But improving from **C** to **S** in such a short time was completely unheard of. Of course, there was no such record in any open library.

(The only ones who have the IS compatibility **S** are people like 'Brunhild' who won the Mondo Grosso, and the Valkyrias who won the group stages...)

In terms of compatibility, Houki was equal to the five strongest pilots in the world.

This sort of thing shouldn't be possible at all—logically , it should be like that.

(If that's the case, the key is...)

Related to that peerless genius, Shinonono Tabane. It should be correct if I think of it like that.

"..."

Tatenashi again gazed at the screen seriously. A sharp glint could be seen from the eyes that belonged to the Sarashikis.

"Let's go to the cafeteria, Kanzashi-san."

"..."

After hearing from a certain information network that buns were sold out at the shop today, I ran into Class 4 when 4th period ended and grabbed Kanzashi's hand.

"It'll be my treat."

"No, no..."

Uu. Kanzashi curled up like a timid rabbit.

But there's no way back now. Either way, the deadline's 5pm today.

(Okay...)

I pulled Kanzashi away a little—or rather, forcefully.

"KYAAH!"

I lifted Kanzashi up and carried her,

Anyway, it's the Princess Cradle.

"Kanzashi-san, you're so light."

"Shu-Shut up...let-let me down..."

"Then, hang on tight."

"!?"

I ignored Kanzashi's protests and ran to the cafeteria.

On the way, I passed by a few girls who screamed in shock, but I ignored them.

I went down to the first level, out of the corridor, and opened the door of the cafeteria that was formed by three areas.

"WE'RE HERE!"

BAM! The door was opened loudly, and I was really loud. Because of these reasons, there were a lot of 'What just happened?' looks directed at me.

"Let go..., ..."

PAK! *PAK!* *PAK!* My head got hit many times.

Using this chance, Kanzashi started to get violent as she kicked me in the chin.

"Wa, idiot. Hey, stop fooling around!"

"Uu...! Uuu...!"

"I can see your panties."

"!?"

Perhaps realizing her actions after I pointed this fact out, Kanzashi, who had been struggling up till now,

gradually reduced her movements, and soon became obedient.

"...-forgivable...unforgivable...unforgivable..."

Kanzashi didn't look at me, but bit her lips tightly as she muttered.

I put Kanzashi down while she was still like this, and to prevent her from running away, I pulled her hand and queued up at the counter.

"Today's set meal of the day is Tartar Fried Chicken. What do you want, Kanzashi?"

"..."

"Okay. Kanzashi will have a large pork chop curry rice ."

"...Meat, I don't like it..."

Ohh, I finally got a response. Maybe this can do.

"The-Then how about the Seafood Rice Bowl?"

"U...Udon..."

"Hm?"

Kanzashi continued to squirm, and she looked at me for a moment, murmuring.

"Just udon will do..."

"Got it. Want some eggs?"

"..."

Shake...Kanzashi shook her head.

"But, I want...Kakiage..."[7C 3]

"Oh, Kakiage. Okay. It's good. Here."

"Uu, mn...it's nice..."

"Okay, I'll buy the tickets and get the meals. Go get some seats."

"Ah...the tables, inside there...they're...empty..."

"Oh, that's true...heh, Kanzashi-san's eyesight's really good."

"It-It's nothing...it's just normal..."

Just when I saw a skill that I didn't expect, our orders came out from the counter.

"Hn? If you have such good eyesight, why do you need glasses?"

"This, is a portable display."

"Heeh, I see."

"A holographic display's...really expensive."

"Is that so? Then, let's go to that table."

"..."

Mn mn. After nodding her head, Kanzashi followed me from behind.

On a side note, the cafeteria here's really big, so there's quite some distance to the seats inside. Because of that, most of them are empty. But since they're the seats where one can see the seas outside, they will be crowded if it's a bright sunny day that makes people happy.

(Today's weather's good too. Lucky!)

At the empty table, I sat opposite Kanzashi.

"Itadakimasu."

"I...Itadakimasu..."

On a side note, in the end, I ordered a Tartar Fried Chicken. The delicious Tartar sauce is irresistibly good. I smiled as I took a large bite out of it.

"..."

As for Kanzashi, she dipped the Kakiage on the udon down into the soup with chopsticks. Most likely, the bubbles that would come out from them would be what she was aiming for. I did feel that Kanzashi was like an excited kid as she continued to look at it innocently.

"Oh, you're the deep-fried sponge kakiage type. Watch out. Laura's of the crispy type. There'll be war once she sees it."

"...No...this, it is a full body bath..."

Oh, a new sect altogether. That was really disrespectful.

Anyway, Kanzashi and I continued with our lunch.

"Even so, the Tartar Fried Chicken today that's fresh out of the fire's really great. Want some, Kanzashi?"

"Huh...?"

Kanzashi raised her head in shock, and I used my chopsticks to pick the Tartar chicken and brought it to her mouth.

"..."

She looked at it blankly, and then saw my face. Kanzashi then lowered her head.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but her ears seemed to be blushing.

"If-If that's...so..."

"Hm?"

"Do you...conquer[7C 4] girls like that...?"

"Huh?"

Throw down[7C 5]? I did carry girls up, but I do let them land properly. I don't think I threw them down once.

"I don't understand. Oh well. Try it,...ah, but you hate meat, right?"

"Erm...it's alright, if it's chicken..."

"Is that so? Great. Then...ahh."

"Ahh...n..."

Feeling somewhat timid, Kanzashi bit onto the Tartar chicken.

One entire piece of chicken was too big for Kanzashi's mouth, and so there was about half of it left on the chopsticks.

"..."

Seeing Kanzashi chew on, I finished off the remaining piece of chicken.

"Well, it's really good."

"!?!?"

It was like she was suddenly shocked when she was about to swallow, Kanzashi patted her throat a few times and hurriedly drank a gulp of water from her cup.

"Haa...haa...haa..."

"Wha-What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"Ah!"

Kanzashi's breathing wasn't in sync yet, but she glared at me sharply. It felt like she was protesting at me or something.

"Well, Kanzashi-san."

"..."

"Can you share some of that delicious looking Kakiage with me?"

On seeing the part that was bitten and tasted, I thought she would give me some of it.

"No-No way!!"

She forcefully refused me, even lifting her bowl up and moving away from me.

"Ah, sorry. I didn't know you liked it that much."

"I-I...won't give this to you..."

It's just Kakiage. No need to be so serious.

"...!!"

Kanzashi seemed to detect something, as she suddenly dropped chilli peppers into my rice.

"GYAAHHHH!!! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?"

"..."

She turned 90 degrees to the side from where I was seeing her, seemingly saying 'Who cares about you'.

Chiu *chiu* *chiu* *chiu* *chiu* *chiu*... she continued to slurp the udon silently.

"Wha-What do I do now. This..."

Seeing the red-dashed rice, I swallowed my saliva.

Is this the famous Calvary hill[7C 6]?... No no no, this isn't the time for jokes.

"It's not that I can't eat it. It's not that I can't eat it..."

If that's the case, I have to eat it.

"It's not that I can't eat it! It's not that I can't eat it!"

GANK! I picked up the bowl and scooped up the rice into my mouth with the chopsticks.

My gung-ho, or rather, brave act now raised applause from around me—however.

"
HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT
!!!!!!!!!"

I could feel my tongue expanding crazily.

My tongue felt like it got ripped off instead of burnt. Water, miso soup. Tartar sauce, I can't even taste anything now.

"Ka-Kan-Kanzashi-san...that's too..."

Tilting her head slightly as she watched me suffer and stutter, Kanzashi said quietly from those thin and even lips.

"Serves you right."

Such cruel words, and an even crueller voice. But at that moment, even if it was for just a moment, Kanzashi smiled.

"...And so, the most important aspects in battle are ' weight', 'speed' and 'mobility'. These three aspects take up a large ratio..."

Fifth period, Class 1-4. Kanzashi listened quietly to the lesson material at the last row.

Actually, it was more like she was leaving it to deaf ears, but that wasn't a problem since the information was in her mind already. Even if she was asked to answer now, she could read it out as if she was reciting it.

--However, that wasn't the main problem.

The main problem was what happened between her and Ichika in the cafeteria during lunch break.

"..."

Rewinding time back.

The scene was when Ichika fed Kanzashi 'Here, ahh', and ate the rest himself.

(Tha-That's not just it...in-in-indirect...kiss...he, even did that...)

And from Ichika's reaction, it didn't look like he hated it.

If he were lying, Kanzashi's instincts would have told her that.

However, Ichika just looked happy in front of her.

"..."

Feeling that she was blushing, Kanzashi hurriedly buried her face into her textbook.

(An-And then...after that...my food...he-he even wanted to eat it...)

Gushuu~...like heat smoking out, Kanzashi's heart got dominated with shame.

(Uu...uuuu...?)

She couldn't understand. She couldn't understand. She couldn't understand.

She couldn't understand him. She couldn't understand his intentions

--And also, she couldn't understand anything about her own heart.

(Wh-What...do I want to do. Ah...? What...will happen to me...?)

Beginning to lose control of herself since she was unable to calm down, Kanzashi began to feel restless as she shook her petite body.

(That thing...on the first time...I don't understand...at all...)

Again, she suddenly remembered Ichika's smiling face.

(A...u...)

Kanzashi held back in order not to let that strange sound out as she was pinching her thigh viciously.

«If you don't understand, shouldn't you try it?»

(Huh...?)

She heard Ichika's voice, and soon lifted her head. She shook her head lightly and looked around.

«Pair up with me, Kanzashi-san.»

(No, no...)

«Why?»

(Be-Because...I don't...I don't understand...I...I, hate things that I don't understand...)

«But if this keeps up, you won't understand anything in the end, right?»

(Even though...it's like that...)

«There's nothing to be afraid of. Just leave it to me.»

(Ahh...uu...)

They were like the lines that appear in the usual hero anime. But these felt better than anything else.

"Hey, pair up with me, Kanzashi."

"O-Okay!"

Kanzashi grabbed Ichika's hand that was stretched out in front of her.

Abnormally excited, Kanzashi stood up forcefully the moment she grabbed the hand.

(...H-uh?)

She suddenly realized it.

The orange sunset shone in from the window outside. The classroom was empty, and the Ichika in her imagination continued to hold onto her hand without disappearing.

(What? ...What?...Whaat?)

Just when Kanzashi was confused, the Ichika in her imagination jumped up.

"I DID IIITTTTTT!!! You said that you wanted to pair up, right? Right!? That's great! Let's run to the staff room and apply for the tag-match team! Okay, *DON!*"

Kanzashi's hand was held tightly by Ichika, who rushed out of the room.

That powerful force that dragged her made Kanzashi realize that this is reality, and she felt her face blush because of the shameful feeling.

(I-In other words...I started spacing out from the 5th period...then until the 6th period...it's over. Orimura-kun's here...he invited me...I mixed up reality with my imagination...)

--This is bad!

Still thinking about this, her body reached the front of the staff room.

"Let's go in then."

"Wa-Wai—"

Wait. Before she could say that, Ichika's hand dragged her into the staff room.

As she was mindful of how her hand was held, Kanzashi signed without understanding what was going on.

"Okay! Let's work hard at the preparation room from today onwards!"

"We-Well..."

"We need to wear our IS when adjusting, and so we need our IS suits. I'll get changed then. See you at the preparation room!"

"Well, that..."

Ta, *ta* ,*ta*. Kanzashi's words couldn't catch up to Ichika's back who was running.

...But Ichika suddenly turned his head behind while running.

"Ah! Which preparation room?"

"The-The...second one!"

"Got it. See you later then!"

Seeing Ichika run off, Kanzashi realized that she had stretched her right hand out when she recovered.

--What did I do that for?

Thinking about this, she started to feel shy and hurriedly retracted her hand.

"..."

She again recalled what happened a few minutes ago.

She couldn't say 'Wait' when they entered the staff room.

--But was that really because she couldn't say it?

--Most likely, she was looking forward to this and ' Didn't say it', right?

"..."

Gugugugugug. She shook her head left and right.

But whether it's her mouth or her heart, she just couldn't say 'You're wrong'.

The sunset shone into the corridor. In the orange world, Kanzashi felt for the first time since birth, the sweet pain that gushed out from her chest.

"Alright. Let's see Kanzashi-san's machine!"

In the second prep room, Kanzashi and I were together .

It's an elimination tag-team tournament for pilots with personal IS, but because of the high standard of this tournament, there were many students other than us who were tuning their machines too.

"I said, please send me the mobility data you got yesterday."

"I want to lighten my armaments. Can I make it if I do so now?"

"Wait! The Hyper Sensors base values are off! Who was the last one who tweaked it!?"

There was quite a ruckus. Since they're working together happily, there will be groups screeching all over the place, but everyone was tuning their IS seriously.

"Heh, that's the first time I'm seeing the upperclassmen with Personal ISes."

"Over there is...the 2nd year, Forte Sapphire-san...with her IS [Cold Blood]...opposite her is the 3rd year, Daryl Cayce-san and her [Hellhound V2.5]..."

I'm somewhat shocked by Kanzashi's smooth explanation.

She spoke so fluently, not stuttering and stopping like usual.

"And...behind is..."

"Ya...Cecilia..."

Standing over there was the representative cadet of England, Cecilia, piloting her IS [Blue Tears].

"Yes. I want to increase the output efficiency by tweaking the mobility."

"We can do that...but it'll be difficult to control the IS, you know? Of course, it won't be as safe."

"No problem. I won't lose in my next battle."

"Oh well. Let's try it. If the consequences are too severe , we'll just change it back to normal."

"You're right."

Cecilia continued to discuss with the 2nd and 3rd year girls who were most likely in the conditioning class.

Suddenly, she turned to look at me. Perhaps she noticed me.

"Humph!"

Her face darkened as she forcefully turned her face away. After I refused to participate in the tag match with her, Cecilia would treat me as an enemy no matter what.

(Well, I do feel sorry about that...)

But there's no need to be that angry.

On a side note. Rin would kick me hard every time we met. Laura would completely ignore me, and Charl would start to say, 'What's wrong, Orimura-kun?'.

"..."

You don't have to be that angry, right...even I will feel hurt.

"...It's about time. We have to start..."

"Oh-Oh yeah, that's right. Do your best."

After checking that I nodded my head, Kanzashi stretched her right hand out. There was a crystal ring on the middle finger of that hand.

"Appear...[Uchigane Nishiki]..."

Kanzashi's body was covered with light, and floated up as the armor was donned on her.

"Hehe..."

It's the next generation of [Uchigane], and though I heard that it's a prototype, it looked completely different.

The skirt armor was modified into a one-winged type. Compared to the defensive [Uchigane], [Uchigane Nishiki] focuses on mobility.

The armor on the wrist became a beautiful line, and it became a construct that could utilize its mobility in combat.

The parts on the shoulders aren't shields, but hold a large winged-shaped thruster and 2 little boosters on both front and back sides of it. That figure resembled [Byakushiki].

Looking at it, the [Nishiki] didn't have any similarities with the [Uchigane], but the Hyper Sensors on the head were of similar design.

"Speaking of which, huh? Don't tell me the machine's complete."

I asked, and Kanzashi, who kneeled down to remove the IS, shook her IS slightly.

"The armaments...aren't done. And...I haven't gotten operational data...it's impossible for it to battle like this..."

"I see. Lemme ask, the armaments are?"

"Hi-performance guided missiles that use a complicated lock-on system...and, the particle cannon's not..."

"Particle cannon? You can use the [Byakushiki]'s data."

Though it's differently designed from the particle cannon on my [Byakushiki], she should be able to use the sample data of output control and structural dynamics.

Thinking about this, I summoned the [Byakushiki]'s console and began to search for it hurriedly.

"Then, this is the [Yukihira Nigata]'s..."

"..."

"Oh, got it."

"!"

I lifted my head, and found myself exchanging looks with Kanzashi.

At that moment, Kanzashi looked aside.

"Hey hey. You can't read the data like this, right? Look ."

I forcefully grabbed her hand and brought her in front of the holographic screen.

"How is it? You can use it as reference, right?"

"..."

"Hm?"

"You, you're too close...a-a little further..."

"Ah, sorry."

Immediately, the hand separated.

"..."

Kanzashi rubbed the wrist that I had touched and again focused on the screen.

"..."

Kanzashi's eyes were serious as she looked intensely at the screen, using her fingers to check the relevant data.

"This...output's too great...it uses too much energy..."

"Ah, that's true. I did suspect this before..."

"It's better to adjust it...you'll waste too much like that..."

"Oh. Then, since you're reading [Byakushiki]'s data, can I ask if if there's anything I don't understand?"

"I'm...okay with that..."

"Mn. Thank you."

"..."

Quickly returning to inspect her own machine, Kanzashi still remained stone-faced as ever, but it seemed like she was looking more lively.

"Then..."

"Orimu~, Kan-chan~"

Patapatapatapata. Footsteps could be heard coming here...there's only one person who would call us that.

"Honne..."

It's Nohohon-san, also known as Nohotoke Honne. She's a secretary of the Student Council, a maid at the Sarashikis and my classmate. Her characteristics are her lazy expressions and the slow movements.

(Hm? If her family served the Sarashikis for generations, she and Kanzashi should be childhood friends too.)

"Ehehe. I'm here to help~"

Honne swayed her drooping sleeves slowly and gently . She just so happened to hit a 2nd year who was passing by, and who glared at her in return .

However, this being Nohohon-san, she was still as carefree as ever.

"Kan-chan, I'm here to adjust your machine~ehehe!"

"St-Stop it...don't...ah, ah..."

It seems that Kanzashi's not used to dealing with this childhood friend who's of the same age.

"Honne...you were called over, by onee-san...right?"

"Huh~? Nope—I'm Kan-chan's personal maid. It's my job to help!"

"..."

"I'm Nohotoke Honne who watches your life from Monday to Thursday!"

For some reason, it felt like a catchphrase from a certain advertisement.

"What about...Friday, Saturday and Sunday?"

"Huh—, I want to rest on weekends!"

"3 days...you really rest too much..."

That's completely right. Please work properly, maid of a prominent family.

"Then, where should we start? Should we upgrade the system? Or the weapon support system?"

"Weapon support system. It won't do if it's not me...I want to set up the mobile control...Honne, you..."

"Adjust the shield barrier, right? Got it!"

"Li-Listen...help me, check the armor..."

"Ehehe, I understand."

Having lost all resistance to Nohohon-san, Kanzashi sighed and lowered her shoulders.

"Wha-What...are you looking at..."

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

"I hate...guys who sta-stare at me like that..."

"Oh, ah, sorry."

After that, the three of us were so busy adjusting the machine that we lost track of time.

Half of the time, I did the adjustments based on the reference books, but due to the brilliance of the occasional suggestions Kanzashi made, I managed to increase the energy efficiency by 15% today. Amazing.

"But really. It's a lot of work to adjust the machine...oh my."

I just need to operate the controls if it's just a system tuning, but the delicate task of tweaking the power output or the structural dynamics means that we had to open up the armor of the machine and work on the parts directly.

We were using mechanical arms, but it's really tough to open the armor like that.

"Orimu, you relied on Professor Tabane's machine's functions. IS itself should be delicately adjusted personally!"

Woah! The day when Nohohon-san gave me an accurate suggestion actually came.

"The IS'...self-improvement and optimization is really impressive...but, you can't...rely on it."

"I-I understand."

"Speak...speaking of which...that..."

Kanzashi started to squirm all of a sudden...what's wrong?"

"Erm...that..."

"?"

She wrapped her fingers around and played around with them. Her eyes wavered, and she looked like she couldn't calm down at all as she looked around, obviously looking suspicious.

"Do you want to go to the bathroom?"

"Ah...!"

Lifting her head up, Kanzashi immediately blushed.

--*GANK!*

"OWW!!"

"Ojyou-sama~[7C 7], I beat up the rude fellow~"

I say, Nohohon-san! Is-Isn't that a screwdriver!? It hurts when you mess around like that!

"Orimu~, I feel that you're so inconsiderate!"

"Gu..."

"Even if she really wanted to go to the bathroom~, it's courtesy for her not to say it!"

Guaahhh! Nohohon-san's so harsh when lecturing me about basic knowledge!

"It's said that with an elder sister around, the younger brother will be unfamiliar with the opposite gender. My friends used to say that in the past, but I guess Orimu's abnormal. That's a bad habit~"

"That-That's not true!"

...I guess.

"Ho-Honne...that's, enough..."

"Yes, ojou-sama!"

"What ojou-sama...don't call me that..."

"Mn! Kan-chan!?"

"I don't like that either..."

The conversation that occurred between them calmed down after that, and Kanzashi again looked over at me.

"Th-Then...the flight test...I hope, you can accompany me..."

"What. That's it? No problem."

"Tha-Thank...you."

Kanzashi cautiously bowed at me.

To me, it felt that it wasn't something that's to be requested like that, so I felt somewhat awkward.

"The-Then, do you want to use this arena?"

"It's flight testing...number 6..."

Speaking of Arena 6, it's the arena that was used a few days ago for [Cannonball Fast], the Super-speed flight training arena. Unlike the other arenas, the space's completely open, and there's no restriction to fly around as long as we keep moving around the central tower of the Academy.

"Alright, let's go!"

"A-Alright..."

"Take care~ I'll go to the control room and use the data scanner to assist you!"

Nohohon-san waved her droopy sleeves softly, and again knocked into another girl, who glared at her slightly for a while.

"Thruster efficiency...check..."

Having opened all the controls of her [Uchigane Nishiki] at Arena 6's conditioning point, all the values entered her eyes.

Due to Honne's help, there was quite some development in the building of the machine. Most likely, she would follow her sister Utsuho to join the conditioning class in second year. That's the level of ability Honne had.

(And...)

Ichika's [Byakushiki] values had a lot of use.

As it was the machine that was developed from the same development center, the data compatibility was much more than expected.

"..."

But maybe, more than that, perhaps Ichika's own existence was important.

(Wha-What...am I thinking...I...)

Kanzashi forcefully rubbed her reddish face into her hands.

Just when she was doing this, a message came from Ichika through the private channel.

"How is it? Can we move off now?"

"Y...Yes..."

"Then, I'll fly off first. We'll meet at the highest point of the tower."

"I-I understand."

Kanzashi bent down and fixed her feet into the gravity catapult.

The holographic display showed the word **Ready**, and it instantly became **Go!**. Kanzashi accelerated and flew to the sky in Arena 6.

(Structural Dynamics...no problem...next, Hyper Sensors...connect, activate...)

Pi *Pi* *Pi*, the Hyper Sensors soon caught [Byakushiki].

Zooming in on Ichika's face, Kanzashi's heart couldn't help but beat faster.

(Ca-Calm down...concentrate...concentrate...)

Noting the output levels of the thrusters on her back, Kanzashi let the machine accelerate.

(Maintaining thrusters in this position...no problem... acceleration...shield barrier to be tested activated...)

She summoned the control option and tried to turn.

It was an action that shouldn't have had any problem, but on activating the shield barrier, the machine started to stutter and stopped.

"...?"

Just when she felt that it was weird, numerous displays showed up, confirming the current parameters.

(Shield barrier created interference when deployed...so ...[PIC] was interfered with...)

It seemed as though there was a problem with the installation of the shield on the wrist, and Kanzashi temporarily cancelled the deployment as she summoned a keyboard on both sides to input data one by one before letting the machine fly.

(Adjusting point of deployment...from [PIC] interference range...Gravitational Deflection Angle...6m in front of machine...undergoing adjustments...then... balancing boosters...4 minus and ignition...)

At the central tower of IS Academy which was in a curved shape, the machine outside it used the thruster output to fly up quickly.

At that time, Kanzashi piloted the machine with both hands on the keyboards and caught up with Ichika, completing the course in the process.

"Yo!"

Ichika casually raised his hand.

And Kanzashi, who didn't know how to respond, nodded her head slightly first.

"How is it? That machine."

"It's alright..."

"Really? That's great."

Smiling away heartily, Ichika just looked so dashing, and Kanzashi hurriedly looked away.

"The-Then...let's go back..."

Feeling that it may end up with something really abnormal if it was just both of them, Kanzashi quickly flew down without waiting for Ichika to answer.

"Heh. It's really fast. It's about as fast as Cecilia's [Blue Tears], right?"

"I-I guess...according to the figures..."

Kanzashi frantically answered.

Her machine quickly flew down at breakneck speed as if it was running away from Ichika.

(...Hhuh?)

Following Kanzashi from behind, Ichika suddenly noticed something abnormal.

Sparks appeared from time to time on the boosters on the legs of the [Uchigane Nishiki] Kanzashi was piloting.. .*PA*...*PAPA*...

(It's really weird.)

Thinking about that, just when he was about to open a communication channel, the booster on the right leg of the [Uchigane Nishiki] exploded.

"!?"

Due to the sudden explosion and the imbalance due to the unexpected loss of one of the boosters, Kanzashi and the machine flew diagonally in a straight line towards the outer wall of the central tower.

"KANZASHI-SAN!"

([PIC] was ineffective...!? Wh-Why—)

Many 'Errors' appeared on the screen, and [Uchigane Nishiki], which had lost control of the system, quickly closed in on the outer wall of the tower.

"Ch—!!"

Kanzashi closed her eyes in reflex. At that moment, a powerful voice flew in like it was tied in.

"KANZASHIIIIIIII!!!"

Using [Ignition Boost] to increase the output of the thrusters to the maximum, Ichika forced his way between Kanzashi and the wall.

(Ah...)

Ichika hugged Kanzashi's body, and his back slammed into the wall.

"Guu...!"

A pilot with an IS on has protection, but the impact couldn't be removed completely as Ichika grimaced with pain.

"O...Orimura...kun..."

"He-Hehe...are you alright...? To be honest, I'm feeling a lot of pain now..."

Saying that as he gave an awkward smile, Ichika looked like a hero to Kanzashi.

The stupid words that were said to calm the situation down sounded really cool to Kanzashi's ears.

"A-Ah...erm...erm..."

"Are you alright, Kanzashi?"

"Huh...? Y-Yeah..."

"Really? That's good."

With the pain still coursing through him, Ichika closed an eye and pulled himself from the wall.

The outer wall of the tower had a huge dent on it due to the impact, and a part of it cracked.

"..."

Continuing to grasp Ichika's hand like that, Kanzashi felt her heart beat so crazily it ached.

It was the first time she stuck so close to a guy's body, but she didn't hate it. It must be because he's Ichika, Kanzashi thought as she matured late.

«Hey, hold it, those students over there! What happened!? I'm seeing an indication that the tower was damaged!?»

"AH, yes. Well, it's an IS training accident. I'm Orimura Ichika from Class 1-1."

"Sarashiki...Kanzashi, from Class...1- 1-4."

«AN ACCIDENT!? YOU AREN'T HURT, ARE YOU!? ARE YOU ALRIGHT!?»

WA WA. Continuing with the questions was the math teacher Edwards Franchee. On a side note, she was born in Canada, 25 years old, and looking for a boyfriend. Her hobby was gardening.

"Anyway, it's good that you aren't hurt. Since you need to return to the Maintenance Branch, please wait for us down there."

«O-Okay. Then, please be careful on the way down.»

After cutting the communication signal, Ichika carried Kanzashi and slowly descended.

"It'll be dangerous if there's another system error. Let's just go down like this."

"A...Alright..."

Gently...nodding lightly, Kanzashi went silent.

Right now, her face was dyed as red as the sunset.

"Ahh...as expected, just as expected, I had to hand in a report..."

Having returned to the maintenance branch, we explained everything to the teacher, and after undergoing a checkup to see if we were alright, a report of more than 10 pages was passed to us.

"Haa...these are really tough. Man..."

"..."

Kanzashi looked like she was rather apologetic as she looked at me.

"Hm, what's wrong?"

"Ah, er...m..., it was...all my fault...so-sorry..."

"Well, you don't have to mind. It can't be helped if it was a machine malfunction."

"Uu..."

As I said that, Kanzashi gripped her hands tightly and lowered her head.

(Ah. She was really affected by it. Well, the machine she fine-tuned had a mishap.)

It's great that she was not hurt.

And having understood her personal limits, Kanzashi should have grown up a lot from now on.

"I say."

"What...is it...?"

"Better to get the people from the conditioning class to help."

"..."

"There's only one week to the tag match. Safety's the most important thing—"

"U...uu...I'll do that..."

"Huh?"

For a moment, I didn't know what to do when I saw Kanzashi nod her head lightly.

I thought she would definitely, wordlessly refuse or say something like 'No...'.

"We-Well...since Nohohon-san's okay, I'll get Mayuzumi-sempai along as well."

"So-Someone you know...is it?"

"Ah, sort of. You see, we met often because of news club stuff, so it naturally ended up like that."

"I-Is...that so..."

? Is it just me, or Kanzashi didn't look too happy just now...

"..."

"..."

Huh? The moment we recovered, we found ourselves with nothing to say.

Edwards-sensei, who had been making a fuss up till now, isn't here now, so it's just Kanzashi and me in the large maintenance branch.

"Ah, that..."

I do feel that there's nothing to say.

"Ah-Ahh-Ahh..."

Forcefully...Kanzashi gripped her hands and ran in front of me.

"Thank you...very much."

"...What for?"

"We-Well...thank you...just now, because of you..."

Kanzashi immediately backed away from me and turned aside. Perhaps she's feeling shy about saying it out loud. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest and softly played with her fingers.

"What, that? Well, isn't that to be expected?"

"..."

Jiii. She continued to stare at me...what's with that?

"...So, cool..."

"Huh?"

"No-Noth-Nothing..."

"? Really?"

Looking outside, the sky became pitch black under the screen of night.

It's been about 10 minutes after we dispelled our ISes, and our bodies should be cold now.

"Let's go back. We'll catch a cold if we continue to stay here."

"O-Okay..."

She nodded her head, but for some reason, Kanzashi didn't move.

"..."

"What's wrong, Kanzashi-san?"

"Do-Don't..."

"Huh?"

She's probably shy. Looking closely, Kanzashi's face is all red now.

"Do...Don't say...san...just, call me Kanzashi..."

After saying those words softly, Kanzashi scampered away as if she was escaping.

Seeing her disappear behind the door, I scratched my head.

(Call her Kanzashi, is it? Our emotional distance should have shortened, right?)

(I-I said it...)

Having returned to her own 1st year dorm, Kanzashi showered in hot water, as *DOKI* *DOKI* her heart beat.

For the Sarashikis' daughter, allowing another to use one's given name had a significant meaning.

"..."

Kanzashi touched her lips and tried to say the words.

'I'-'chi'-'ka'...

"..."

DOKI *DOKI*. Blushing furiously, Kanzashi felt that her heart was a fragile item as she gently touched her chest.

It wasn't too big, but the treasure of love that was hidden in it was really soft.

"Honne...really has it good..."

They're both in their first years, yet they had a difference of 2 cup sizes.

Her sister Utsuho was the same. She had well-ripened fruits.

And her older sister—

"Ah!"

Upon thinking till here, her head suddenly cooled down.

Kanzashi, who was drowning in the heat of love, became a captive by her own realistic sense of inferiority, and her body jerked slightly.

(Tatenashi...nee-san...)

The existence she looked up to yet couldn't catch up to. ..Sarashiki Tatenashi.

She was a gentle sister, an outstanding, strong person and a lovely woman—she was completely flawless.

(I...can't catch up to that person at all...)

It was unknown when she started to think like that.

--She ended up unable to catch up to that back.

--She couldn't look at that expression directly.

--She started to feel painful about bearing the same family name.

"..."

Gya *gya*. The warm shower of rain fell.

Lowering her head, Kanzashi looked like she was crying, but that face—looked up.

"Calm down...nee-san, nee-san...I-I..."

--I, Kanzashi, won't be crushed as long as I have Ichika .

She finally found a hero, someone who had a bright smile.

"Orimura, Ichika..."

She tried to call that name again, and she was happy yet trembling anxiously. The inexplicable drive rose up within her.

Courage—Perhaps that's what people call it.

"Thank you very much!"

After the special training ended, Houki and the kendo members bowed and thanked each other.

"Hey~. You don't have to say it so stiffly."

Floating down from above was Houki's coach and tag match partner, Tatenashi.

She looked carefree as usual as she waved her hand lightly.

"No, it's unacceptable for a swordsman[7C 8] to lack formalities."

"Swordsman?"

Seeing the stern looking Houki, Tatenashi couldn't help but give a wry smile.

"Oh yeah. How about we have dinner today? At the cafeteria in the second year dorm. I'll lead the way."

"Huh? No, I—"

"Okay. It's decided. Let's go, let's go."

"Wait-Wait a minute! I—"

"Okay okay let's go!"

"Ha..."

Unable to endure Tatenashi's angelic expression, Houki couldn't help but sigh deeply.

It was the same when she complied to pair up with her . Why was Houki unable to resist Tatenashi at all?

At first, she thought that this sempai wasn't willing to listen to others, but even after thinking about that and getting manipulated, there were a lot of inexplicable things.

(For-Forget about it. It's not like I hate it.)

Now being led by the hand that was holding hers, they walked to the changing room in the arena.

It wasn't something she hated.

"..."

She remembered her own sister who used to hold her hand like this.

Shinonono Tabane—

To Houki, Tabane was an existence she couldn't surpass no matter how hard she tried.

When she was young, Tabane was someone she relied on, and someone she was proud of.

But unknowingly, she felt that the difference between her and her sister had started to show.

--That person, she's of a completely different breed from me.

The inherent talent difference was too great.

But even so, somewhere in her heart, the aspect where she viewed her sister Tabane as someone she vaguely admired only lasted until 'That Incident'.

(--)

"Houki-chan."

"Ah, what is it!?"

"What's wrong? We reached the changing room."

"Huh, I see, yeah. Okay."

"Are you thinking about something? You look really scary."

"Do-Do I?"

"I do. Girls are prettier when they smile—!"

Tatenashi went behind Houki and moved both hands under her armpits.

"Koochi koochi koochi!"

"GUHAA! HA-HAHAHA! STO-STOP IT... AHAHAHAHA!!"

Just like that, they spent two minutes in laughter, and Houki was out of breath when the tickling attack ended.

"Haa... haa... haa..."

"Mn--, Houki-chan and Laura-chan's reactions are so cute...speaking of which."

"Wha-What is it?"

Finally regaining her breath, Houki opened the locker and answered,

"Houki-chan, regarding your elder sister—Professor Tabane, do you keep her away?"

"..."

It wasn't that she hated it. Recently, she finally started to realize it.

But she would remember that incident when they met.

She wanted to seal her memories, her lack of control over her emotions, and—

(The hurt I inflicted on her...)

All those were her own fault.

Not Tabane's fault, but her own fault.

She couldn't control herself, drowned in power, and caused 'That Incident' to happen.

She no longer wanted to remember that, and now she wanted to run away from everything related to Tabane.

In fact, she wanted to reject the entrance to IS Academy, but she finally entered because the

government somewhat forced her. Of course, that was because she was Tabane's imouto.

"It's not that I hate her."

"Really. That's good. A family should get along well together."

Though I really can't say that about others—

Tatenashi murmured, although it wasn't heard by Houki.

"Let's take a shower together."

"Huh? No, I'll just use my own room—"

"Okay okay. That guy's gonna hate the sweaty smell."

That guy. Houki knew who Tatenashi was referring to, and her face immediately blushed.

"It's so late already, and there shouldn't be anyone in the shower room. We got the whole room, you know?"

"Pl-Please don't drag me along! I'll just walk on my own."

Though Houki protested, Tatenashi just answered with a smile and even pulled Houki by the arm.

...

.....

.....

"Ah~ it feels so good."

In the shower of hot water, Tatenashi let out a refreshing sigh.

The showerheads in the shower room were separated, and both of them entered neighboring cubicles. Even though they were separated, the leg and head area were completely open for everyone to see, so there would normally be girls chatting away happily. The spacers were all translucent glass sheets, and though they could block the exposure of the chest to the thigh, the human figure would be shown as a silhouette.

Houki didn't like this shower room as her bust size would be checked on by the other girls.

"..."

"Are you the bathing type, Houki-chan?"

Tatenashi suddenly asked Houki, who remained silent up till now.

"Well, as for what you said just now."

"Hm? About Houki-chan's onee-san?"

Nn. Houki nodded her head.

"I don't really hate her. I'm really grateful about the Personal IS."

"I see."

"But I still can't understand."

"Can't understand what?"

"What was my sister thinking..."

"Hmm."

Kyushh. Tatenashi turned off the shower and leaned on the spacer.

The space between the body and the spacer couldn't take the ample breasts, and they were squashed.

"You're scared because you don't understand?"

"..."

Getting a silent affirmation, Tatenashi continued,

"If that's the case, I'm the same."

"Huh?"

"So I'm sure your onee-san's the same as well."

Unable to understand.

Unable to understand, and being afraid as a result.

However, one has to understand that courage was needed.

The courage that surpasses the fear of hurting oneself, that surpasses the fear of hurting others.

"It's alright."

"In-In what case?"

"There's no need to worry. I'm sure your onee-san would treat you as someone important."

"..."

"So, there's no need to be scared."

Explaining this gently, Tatenashi maintained a silent smile on her face until the end.

The next day, in the second preparation room after school.

"Ah, Mayuzumi-sempai! Thank you for your appearance today!"

"Let me say first that my appearance fee's really high, you know~? An exclusive, ahem, date for once."

"Huuh?"

"A date with Orimura-kun. Fufu—that's something to be proud of."

"Pl-Please spare me."

If we want to complete Kanzashi's personal IS, we definitely need the 2nd year ace of the conditioning class, Mayuzumi Kaoruko-sempai to help us.

"Okay~ Okay~ Okay~. I want to go on a date with Orimu~"

And there's Nohohon-san, Nohotoke Honne. She's a first year, but amongst the members of the conditioning course, her ability's top notch.

"Fuu, hm, then, do I need to call in Kyouko and Fee to help?"

As she said that, Mayuzumi-san pulled her handphone out to gather her team.

And the bait was—

"Mn, two photos of Orimura-kun. Anyway, it's not like you can't have a date in school, right?"

Me again? But I'll be willing to toil on if I can get a flock of fish to bite on.

"REALLY!?"

A voice came over from the other side to confirm. Most likely, it's that 'Kyouko' or whoever.

"Tha-That's still acceptable."

"OKAY! OKAAAYY!! DEAL! DEAL DEAL! ZUU-SAN ! BRING YOUR BEST CAMERA ALONG!!"

Since when did Mayuzumi-san...become Zuu-san?

"Okay okay. How about Fee?"

"Heh. I think I want that famous massage."

"There's no problem right? Orimura-kun?"

"Haa, well, never mind. I've done quite a few massages recently when I was sent to the clubs."

"Okay! It's decided! Hurry up and gather at the second prep room! Last one here will have to treat juice!"

After saying that, Mayuzumi-san hung the phone up. However, there's only me, Kanzashi, Mayuzumi-san and Nohohon-san here, so it's just a showdown between Kyouko-san and Fee-san.

"Then—, let's get to work!"

Mayuzumi-san smiled. 30 minutes later, I felt the strictness of the conditioning course that would drive me crazy.

"Orimura-kun, hand over the cables over there! All of them!"

"Then get the super-large wrench and the hi-frequency cutter."

"Fu. There aren't enough holographic displays. Get a few LCDs here. 8 will be enough. Borrow a mini-TV here too."

"O-Okay."

Anyway, I went around working busily.

In order to complete Kanzashi's personal machine [Uchigane Nisihiki], all the second year members of the conditioning class were present and fighting.

The hardware included the thrusters, boosters, armor, armaments, internal firearms and so on. Also—the core needed to use data to create the respective parts and the final model of the machine. Kanzashi continued to assemble the IS in order to operate it immediately after finishing work.

However, there're a lot of problems with the software.

It's based on the [Uchigane], but there's the adjusting and checking of things that include the construct of the [Multi-Lockon-System], the booster's [Unit Control System] optimization and efficiency maximization, the machine's [Energy Bypass Operating System] simulation, and the [Shield Barrier] system.

Helping to support the development, the pilot, Kanzashi, had been operating on both software and hardware with the support of Nohohon-san, She's working on things far more than what an ordinary person can do, like operating the machine, gathering data and controlling the feedback.

What's most amazing however is the way she's controlling those machines. She's not just using voice control, eye control or body gestures, but also using both hands and both feet to control 2 keyboards each, 8 holographic keyboards altogether.

I know that she can put her hand between the keyboards above and below. As the keyboard below's being typed on, the keyboard above can be controlled by the hitting motion.

The problem is that the toes are doing the same thing, though she's using [PIC] to let the IS float in mid-air, that's practically god-like.

As a side note, the keyboard's not flat, but a fully customized model where each key's shaped in a sphere.

(Customized for herself, like how Tabane-san does it?)

Something like 'It's too slow to move the fingers if it's just the ordinary method'.

What kind of construct is that?

(But even so.)

The way Kanzashi's floating in the air, with both hands and feet surrounded by light was like a wizard in a fantasy game.

"--How pretty."

"?"

"What are you saying?" Kanzashi tilted her head.

"No-Nothing much."

I subconsciously muttered. Thinking about it, it's really embarrassing, so I coughed a few times to hide it.

"Hey—, Orimura-kun, don't get lazy! The laser-arm there."

"Get me the data-scanner! Godspeed!"

"Erm, and also, please take down the ultrasonic sensor. "

Now, it's a rush down to the equipment store.

Anyway, I sweated and toiled as I brought the equipment over.

"Orimura-kun, help me tidy my hair."

"Orimura, juice! I want some!"

"Ah, please get some snacks."

Huh? Is it just me? Why is it that even unnecessary chores are added into it?

"Ah, I ran out of shampoo. Help me buy. I want vanilla ."

"Orimura, please return this book to the library."

"Mn, help me check out the set meal of the day for dinner."

"Huuh—! That has nothing to do with work, right? Neither does this nor that!"

"Ah, you found out?"

"Che. Pretty smart, aren't you."

"Fufu, that was a joke."

How, how tiring.

It's not just physical fatigue due to the carrying; Even the mental fatigue swarmed onto me.

"Haa..."

I sighed from the bottom of my heart. It felt like even my soul was about to float away.

"Heheh."

Seeing me like this, Kanzashi chuckled.

It's just a little smile, but it glittered brighter than any diamond.

"Okay okay, we got the basic parts assembled together. Sarashiki-san, do you feel something weird about the machine's movements?"

"It-It's alright..."

On the day before the tag match, they finally ended our final run of work at 9pm.

On hearing Kanzashi's answer, Kaoruko nodded her head. Yup yup.

"How about the weapons control system? Finally, is the [Multi Lockon System] completed?"

"Ye-Yes. The normal [Lockon System] can...be used..."

Kyouko, who planned on working as an arms developer in the future, seemed to be concerned about that.

Right now, the [Uchigane Nishiki] has hi-performance guided missiles amongst its armaments, 6 missile pods altogether, 8 mini missiles in a defensive type weapon system. It's a weapon that can fire 48 of them at one go, but as the important '48 independent operational' [Multi Lockon System] wasn't completed, the supposedly high accuracy and high firepower type didn't appear.

However, the fact that they managed to complete the machine to such an extent in less than a week, was due to Kaoruko, Kyouko, Fee and Honne.

And also—

"..."

Kanzashi secretly glanced at Ichika.

Currently, he was clearing up the mechanical tools that were used, and like usual, he was the one who ended up doing all the physical stuff.

(Orimura...kun...)

On looking at him, her eyes started to be passionated.

"Hm?"

Fuu, Kaoruko detected the gaze from Kanzashi's eyes, and her eyes began to glitter.

"Then! That'll be all. We'll be making a move first then. "

"Hm? What are you saying, Kaoruko? We'll be scolded if we don't send the machinery and equipment back."

"Ahh. Okay okay. Can't Orimura-kun just do it?"

"Me? Well, it's not like I really mind..."

"Oh my. How kind of you. Nn—"

"Yay~ Then, Orimu~, we'll leave it to you then~"

"Yay~" Fee and Honne cheered, *pechi* *pechi*, as they repeated this somewhat unknown high–touch.[7C 9]

"Th-That!"

Kanzashi was stuttering, but she decided to thank everyone who worked so hard to help her, so she said really loudly.

"THAN-THANK YOU VERY MUCH. I-I DEFINITELY COULD'T HAVE DONE THIS ON MY OWN. REALLY, THANK YOU, THANK YOU VERY MUCH!"

She earnestly lowered her head.

Seeing Kanzashi like that, the five of them showed a kind smile.

"Ahaha. Don't really mind. Aren't we all friends in school."

"Ah, well. It's meaningful to meet a Japanese made IS after so long."

"Nn nn—please treat me to dessert next time."

"I want cake~"

After being surrounding by cheery voices, Kanzashi felt tears well up in her eyes.

Up till now, she was so obstinate—

But even so, the world was still filled with the light of kindness.

"Then, we're going back."

""""Ohh—""""

"Orimura-kun, we'll leave the rest to you."

"Yes."

"Sarashiki-san, do your best."

Kaoruko whispered to Kanzashi's ear just when she was spacing out, and even gave a small knowing look.

On hearing that, Kanzashi immediately blushed and looked down.

"..."

Sweat immediately appeared.

(Wha-What's with that...telling me to do my best...)

While keeping her head down, she still glanced at Ichika secretly.

He was panting heavily as he put his life on the line to carry the heavy equipment.

(Wha-What do I do...? No...no matter what, I want to help him...)

"Well."

Deactivating her IS and opening the armor, Kanzashi landed on the floor.

"Er...Erm..."

"Hm? Ah, it's okay, Kanzashi. Just fine-tune [Uchigane Nishiki]."

"Bu...But..."

"Okay okay. Well, if you're done, hurry up and go back. Isn't the usage time for the bath today very short?"

"Wa...WAIT A MINUTE!"

The unexpectedly loud response caused Ichika to back away slightly fearfully.

"O-Oh."

"..."

Kanzashi being Kanzashi, she immediately felt shy about speaking out loud, and turned back to the tuning on the [Uchigane Nishiki].

KACHANK *KACHANK*. The maintenance sounds echoed through the preparation room.

In the spacious preparation room, only Ichika and Kanzashi were present.

(Wha-What do I do...what do I do...)

Kanzashi wondered as she continued to fine-tune the [Uchigane Nishiki].

The machine was without a pilot, and thus in standby mode now. Of course, she didn't forget to let the core optimize itself.

"..."

She glanced slightly at Ichika.

Though they were all heavy machinery and equipment , he was moving them fluidly. It seemed that he didn't realize that he and Kanzashi were alone.

(He-He's really used to...handling girls...)

Even though she didn't join the inner circle of girls, she did hear the rumors.

Rumors like the guy named Orimura Ichika having a good relationship with all the Personal IS pilots in 1st year.

"As expected...I'm still..."

As a Personal IS pilot, the girl still turned her face back to recall.

All of them were all girls with overwhelming charm.

Kanzashi felt really depressed, and there was an ache in her chest.

"..."

She started to feel dejected.

If she can—umm, was more loveable than now. If she could be even cuter now—

"Kanzashi."

"HYA...!?"

Just when she lowered her head and got lost in her trail of thoughts, Ichika suddenly patted her on the shoulder.

As it was too sudden, Kanzashi got shocked and straightened her back.

"Wh-Wha...what's wrong...?"

"I'm done here. What about you?"

"Huh...we-well...?"

There were a lot of materials and equipment, yet he really cleared them all.

Most likely, time flew as Kanzashi was thinking to herself.

"Then, let's go back."

"A...Alright..."

Kanzashi couldn't calm down as she stroked [Uchigane Nishiki] that was in standby phase, the ring on the middle finger of her right hand.

She walked with Ichika side by side out of the entrance of the preparation room.

"..."

The tremendous beating in her chest was now painful, as if it was giving a loud cry.

"Then, let's get changed. I'll go to Room B at the 3rd Arena. What about you, Kanzashi?"

"Well, that...Number 2-, A..."

"Is that so? I'll walk with you for a while then."

"Al...right..."

Kanzashi and Ichika walked together side by side. They could see the sky outside through the window, and it was completely dark now

"But we finally completed it."

"Yeah...thanks to everyone..."

And naturally, the conversation ended as both of them continued to walk silently.

Kanzashi was so nervous she didn't know what to do, but Ichika just thought that Kanzashi preferred to remain silent.

"And, we're here."

"Y-Yes..."

Ichika raised his head, waved, and walked away.

Kanzashi stared at that figure's back for a while, and only when she lost sight of Ichika did she run into the changing room as if she was escaping.

(I'm...weird...)

They weren't so close that she could talk to Ichika naturally.

She thought that she could say something at the beginning.

(I...I, do...)

--Like him. Isn't that the case?

Thinking about this, her heart pounded again.

(No, I can't...think about that, no way...)

Finally reaching her locker somehow, Kanzashi silently leaned and placed her hand on her chest.

"Fuu..."

After a shower, I rubbed my head and sprawled on the bed.

"We finally completed it."

The development of [Uchigane Nishiki], which we despaired over in the beginning, finally became reality with the help of Mayuzumi-sempai and the rest. Of course, this did involve a certain 'third-party' power—

KOK *KOK*.

"Ah, I'm in."

On hearing the knocking on the door, I stood up.

Gachunk. The door opened, and the 'third party's standing there.

"Hello ♪"

"Tatenashi-san."

For some reason, my feelings sank, and I couldn't help but look around the corridor.

...Luckily, it looks like nobody saw us.

"Can I come in?"

"Huh, yes, well..."

"Then, excuse me."

Like usual, Tatenashi-san entered the room with graceful steps before walking to the bed and leaping onto it.

...Haa. Why does she feel like a kid?

"Ichika k-un."

"Yes-Yes."

"Massage~"

She even flailed her legs about.

...Hey. You there, your panties...I can see them...

"Haa..."

But since this person's that Sarashiki Tatenashi, it's pointless for me to resist. Even worse, I think I'll be messed around with even worse if I dared to resist.

(Like for example, ordering me to massage when I'm bathing. Well...)

Besides, that's something that can't be joked about.

I put my hands on Tatenashi-san's body unwillingly (definitely unwillingly!)

"Speaking of which, who are you paired up with tomorrow?"

Guu...*gu*...I continued to feel her for the stiff parts as I asked what was on my mind.

"Hn? Isn't the team list released already?"

"No, I didn't have the chance to look at it since I was in the prep room. Huh? Why're your legs so stiff? Did you run a marathon?"

"Hey, first year. I did a lot of valuable speeches during the school gathering. Weren't you listening?"

"Hahaha, that can't possibly be happening now, right?"

"Ichika-kun, you can't say lies that can't even fool yourself, you know?"

"Guu..."

"Yare yare.[7C 10] Also, my partner's Houki-chan."

"Is that so—, Houki...HUH!? HOUKI!?"

The unexpected name shocked me. Since it's Houki, so I thought she would say something like 'One person's enough!'. Tatenashi-san...she's at it again.

(Hn...?)

—Ahh, yeah. Tatenashi-san's using her own way.

To look for the existing link in an imouto with her elder sister.

Perhaps she found a silhouette of her own imouto inside.

However, as expected, Tatenashi-san still couldn't ignore Houki's situation.

"Ichika-kun, you really have quite the good relationship with your sister."

"Wha-What? Why so sudden?"

"Because Orimura-sensei's always really strict with you."

"Is-Is that a display of a good relationship?"

"Ah, so you don't know. You don't understand at all—because you're important, special, she had to be even stricter with you."

—And you mustn't die.

"..."

Tatenashi-san casually said those words. I didn't understand it immediately, but I was stunned.

Fight—death—me—?

My memory got awakened again. That person who looked exactly like Chifuyu-nee, Orimura Madoka. Her hand held onto a tool that was born to kill, giving me an undefined killing intent.

"..."

Unknowingly, my right shoulder started to tremble.

I tried my best not to let Tatenashi-san notice as I grabbed my right arm with my left hand to calm it down and lecture it, earnestly praying that I was just thinking of it.

"Well, a war's going to start again."

Out of a sudden, Tatenashi-san revealed her normal expression as she flailed her two legs again.

And the fear that held me scattered like the wind.

"Ichika-kun, massage my butt."

"So-SO I SAY! CAN'T YOU JUST LEAVE THIS TO UTSUHO-SAN OR NOHOHON-SAN!?"

It's not just ample, but the figure of Tatenashi-san's hip is really refined. Just from thinking about that soft touch that was in my hands, blood felt like it was going to gush up to my nose and spurt out.

"Nope. Ichika-kun's skill is the best."

"Ahh—that..."

I got praised, and I do feel a little happy.

"Calm down, calm down, clear your mind of useless thoughts ♪."

"Ufufu." Laughing away is Tatenashi-san as she looks as delighted as ever.

"..."

I swallowed my saliva...to a guy, this trial is unavoidable.

"Do it now!"

...No no no. There's no need to do this. I told myself off .

"Ichika-kun."

"Ah, yes."

"Should I take off my panties?"

"DAAAAAAAAA!!? WWHHY-WWWHHHY!!!!?"

"You looked like you wanted to see it, you know ♪?"

Tatenashi-san continued to chuckle as she leaped onto me and started to rub my face.

"..."

Kanzashi was using the kitchen in her dorm.

The gas stove was giving off piping hot air, and Kanzashi, who was sitting on a chair in front of it, looked on impatiently.

(Orimura-kun...will-will he eat it...)

She was making green-tea-flavored cupcakes.

One of the many specialty dishes of Kanzashi.

"..."

Looking at the clock on the wall to check the time, it was now past 10pm.

Maybe Ichika would be sleeping. Thinking about this, Kanzashi's heart sank again as she stared at the stove

expectantly, thinking that it would have been better to bake it earlier.

CHING!

"Ah...!"

It's done!

Kanzashi's expression immediately brightened. She carefully placed her mittens on both hands and took out the cupcakes from the oven.

The sweet smell of baked sugar and the aroma of green tea scattered out.

(Uu, yup...well done...)

Hoho. The cupcakes that were giving off hot air so yummy that it could be eaten.

Kanzashi gently put each cupcake into the prepared bag one by one, and then used a string to tie the opening.

(The-Then...I'll give it to Orimura-kun to eat...)

--So happy.

And because she was too happy, Kanzashi's heart felt like it was going to explode.

"Be-Before it cools down."

Holding the three cupcakes with both hands, Kanzashi ran out of the kitchen.

"Ehehe..."

Taking three, two steps on the corridor, Kanzashi couldn't help but smile.

--Really happy.

Giving something to the person she liked. While she was somewhat shy about it, she also felt a little proud.

(I want to see him.)

I want to see him. I want to see him. I want to see him.

Kanzashi continued to run on the corridor and hastened her pace.

She turned around the next corner, and soon, she was about to reach Ichika's room.

"Suu...haa..."

She stopped at the corner to adjust her breathing.

(I'll go slowly from here.)

She didn't want to be seen panicking. Thinking about this, she turned the corner.

Kacha.

"Huh?"

Ichika's door was open, and Kanzashi hid instinctively.

"Mn~ I'm really happy."

"U—!"

She definitely didn't mistake that. It was her sister, Tatenashi's voice.

(Wh-Why in this room.)

Hiding at the wall, she peeped in from there.

"Damn it, that's enough. Spare me the agony."

"Huh—isn't that pretty good?"

Tatenashi said that as she tugged at Ichika's arm.

Seeing them like this, Kanzashi's breathing stopped for a moment.

"Both of them seem to have quite the good relationship ."

CREE, *CREE*. Her heart ached as if a knife had pierced into it.

Kanzashi then subconsciously held onto the cupcakes tightly.

"Then, how is it? Kanzashi-chan's machine. How is it?"

--Huh?

"Hmm? What, basically."

--What's, going on?

She couldn't help but prick her ears and eavesdrop on their conversation, and her heart rang like a siren.

She shouldn't listen.

She mustn't listen to it at all.

"How was my machine's data?"

--!?

Subconsciously shocked, Kanzashi immediately stuffed her mouth and leaned her back on the wall.

(The test data Orimura-kun gave me.)

She thought that it was [Byakushiki]'s, but it was actually—

(Nee-san's machine's?)

Krak *krak*, her world started to collapse.

Nobody had any ill intent, however—Kanzashi had her own pride.

([Uchigane Nishiki]'s assembly...I finally managed to complete it with my own power...finally...finally!)

Perhaps she thought that she caught up to her sister, or that's what she had thought.

"Ah...a..."

It was an illusion.

All that was an illusion.

The gentle Ichika.

The completion of [Uchigane Nishiki].

--All of it.

All that was completed by her own sister.

"Hii...!"

Thinking about this, Kanzashi's heart couldn't help but imagine about her sister.

The perfect appearance, outstanding brain, athletic ability that far surpasses an ordinary person, the charisma that locks the hearts of many in.

"Ah...ah...ahh..."

It's scary.

It's scary It's scary It's scary.

It's scary It's scary It's scary

--The despair, darkness.

"No...no..."

"So, you—"

Can continue to remain powerless.

"—!"

Her heart and body felt like they couldn't take it.

Kanzashi ran out.

She ran, ran, and ran, until she reached her room in a daze.

"H...Haa...Ha...Haa..."

Her shoulders couldn't stop trembling, and her face was covered with trails of tears that looked like they were drawn on it as they drip onto the floor.

"Uu..."

She forcefully rubbed her eyes to wipe her tears away.

But the tears swelled up again, and Kanzashi couldn't take it as she escaped into her bed.

(I...I just-just...I just...)

"Just continue to remain powerless."

The cruel voice of her imagination pierced through her chest.

And then, the dam burst as tears flowed out.

"Uu-uu...uehhh..."

Choking and crying, her heart was wavering.

"Uwaaaaaaaaa...uwaaaaaaaaaaa..."

Feeling that she really wanted to die, Kanzashi just continued to cry alone.

Chapter 4:The Condition for a Hero

(Is it morning...already?)

Rubbing her swollen eyes, Kanzashi slowly got out of her bed.

She couldn't feel even worse now.

However, today's the day of the Personal IS pilot tag match tournament. Right now, it's impossible to even think of resting.

(I have to go...)

She staggered and walked to the basin area, and washed her face with cold water.

Calming herself down, Kanzashi put her glasses on.

"..."

She had to work hard today no matter what.

She continued to think that way. Even though she still couldn't accept it psychologically, she could only think that way.

(The tournament schedule. They will show the match-ups...at that time...)

But if they progressed smoothly, they would have to face off against Tatenashi, even if they didn't know when .

--*Cree*. Her chest hurt.

"..."

Ichika and Tatenashi, who looked really happy. She understood that they didn't mean to agitate her, but she still felt really hurt.

(I can't beat that person, I can't.)

She bit her lower lip tightly.

Tears still swelled in her eyes.

--If only there was a hero around.

Like in a manga, where the hero would appear majestically, a flawless hero. A powerful, strong, kind, unwavering and upright partner who would follow his own justice until the end.

"U..."

Kanzashi saw the hero in her dream interchange with Ichika, and couldn't help but shake her head.

(Either way, I have to go.)

Feeling so inferior that she wanted to disappear, Kanzashi left the room.

"Then, we'll invite the Student Council President, Sarashiki Tatenashi, to deliver the opening address."

After Utsuho-san said that, she took a step back from the microphone on the podium.

On a side note, Nohohon-san and me, members of the Student Council, were lined up behind Utsuho-san.

"Fuaah...sleepy sleepy..."

"Shh. Nohohon-san, the head of the teaching staff is looking here."

"Okay..."

I wouldn't detect it if I don't look closely, but Nohohon-san nodded her head slightly.

However, I don't know if it caused the opposite effect as she swayed around like a daruma[7D 1].

...Ahh, the teacher's looking over.

That head of teaching staff has inverted triangular eyes , hair tied to the back, dressed in an angular shirt. has thick red lipstick on and has the title 'oni-baba'[7D 2]. However, she should be cuter than a real demon...On a side note, the demon I'm talking about is Chifuyu-nee.

"Everyone, we're having the Personal Pilot Tag match tournament. I hope that everyone can learn something from the match. Please enjoy the show!"

The clear tone, the precise pronunciation, they all felt like some beautiful music.

Like usual, Tatenashi-san gave an overwhelming presence. There's no other reason for why she's so popular.

"Well, not only that."

PAN! The fan opened, and the words on it read ' Bakuto'[7D 3].

"To let every student enjoy this, the Student Council members specially came up with the plan. It's called **Prediction of the Winning Pair—Meal Vouchers Fight**!" [7D 4]

WAAAAAAHHH!! The students who were lined up properly broke into ruckus.

"Hey, isn't that gambling?"

"Please relax, Vice-President Orimura."

"Huh?"

"I finished the negotiations."

Tatenashi-san gave me a smile, and nobody in the teachers camp looked like they disagreed...Chifuyu-nee however looked like she had a headache.

"And this isn't gambling. It's just simple assistance. Just using one's own vouchers only. It's just guessing who will win."

"Is-Isn't this gambling already!?"

An-And I never heard of such a plan before.

Just when I wanted to say that, Nohohon-san tugged gently at the bottom of my shirt.

"Orimu—, you hardly come to the Student Council~. We decided through voting."

"Ku... Recently, I was stuck in the preparation room the whole time...!"

What's going on? Suddenly creating a gambling cult...

But this is the charisma of IS Academy's Student Council President, Sarashiki Tatenashi. She really grasped the hearts of the students, and my heart couldn't help but be dyed marine blue.[7D 5]

"Then, I'll announce the matchups!"

After saying that, the large holographic screen appeared behind Tatenashi-san.

Shown right at the top is—

"Geh!?"

The first battle, **Orimura Ichika and Sarashiki Kanzashi** **VS** **Shinonono Houki and Sarashiki Tatenashi**—

(Another inevitable meeting in the first round? This looks tough.)

Remembering the time when I faced off against Laura, I sighed deeply.

(But is Kanzashi okay? Suddenly having to fight Tatenashi-san out of a sudden—)

I couldn't see her in the crowd of girls whose hands were raised.

(We have to remain on standby in the same pit. I'll discuss it with her later.)

(Gosh! I'm going against Ichika!)

Once the matchup schedule was released, Houki felt really happy.

(Fufufu, I'll show him my ability!)

To be honest, Houki improved a lot through Tatenashi's training.

(It won't be like the last time! [Akatsubaki] has evolved a lot since last time. This time, this time...!)

I must win! Houki raised her tightly clenched fist to her head.

(Tha-That's right. I must win...I must win this...and, and then, at tomorrow's hotel dinner, I-I-I will con-confess, and-and then, we-we'll-we'll go out together ...we'll be dating! This time!)

Focusing on that more than anything in a certain sense , Houki used her wish as fuel to support her burning passion.

"Ah, Orimura-kun."

Tatata. Running over here is Mayuzumi Kaoruko-san .

"What's the matter? I'm going to the 4th Arena to change into the IS suit. I've got to hurry."

I have to make a detour to reach the 4th Arena, and it's really far. A mid-distance running before the match starts ? The one who assigned the rooms is either an oni or an akuma.[7D 6]

"Well, well, what are the odds?"

"Huh."

The paper in front of me indicated that there were overwhelming odds for the Houki and Tatenashi-san pair.

Well, Tatenashi-san's the only 'National Representative ', so she's on a completely different level from those who are only Cadets.

"And then I-I'm the last one."

"Well, Sarashiki-san's data's still a complete unknown."

Next, the second best odds are a second year and third year pairs, then Charl and Laura, and Cecilia and Rin.

"So there's only 10 people, 5 pairs of personal IS pilots. "

"Yup. Amongst them, there're 7 in the first years. This year's abnormal, really abnormal. There's only *one* third year, and amongst the second year, including Ta-chan, there are only *two* people. Also, the first years seem like they all have the latest 3rd Generation frames."

"Sure sounds impressive."

"Why do you sound so unconcerned? It's all because of you, *you*!"

She pointed her finger at me. Is-Is that so.

"Furthermore, Shinonono-san's [Akatsubaki] is a 4th generation."

"Seems that way."

"Heh! That sounds more like it!"

You were the one who said that. I couldn't say it out though, so I remained silent because of the pressure.

"Anyway, please make a comment before the match! I'll be really busy if I don't compile everyone's lines. Here , pose!"

Then, *kacha!* She pressed the shutter. She's as energetic as always.

"Photo OK! Now for the comment."

"Huh, erm...then I'll do my best."

"Aim for the win! Something like that!"

"No, that's..."

"Hmm. Ah, that's right."

Mayuzumi-sempai put her hand under her chin to look like she's thinking of something. Perhaps she did think of something?

"'You'll be my harem slave if you lose to me'...how about that?"

"What, that's!"

"Nope, that's because nee-san said something like that. "

Ahhh, how did that interview get edited until like that!

Speaking of which, what did she mean by harem slave ?

"Ahaha. It's really fun to tease Ichika-kun a bit. Just like what Ta-chan said."

"Please don't do that. Please."

"Well, don't say that—"

Just when Mayuzumi-sempai said that as she waved her hands.

--*BOOM!*

"!?"

An earthquake suddenly struck, and the ground shook wildly.

"Kya..."

"Danger!"

Shaking continuously, Mayuzumi-sempai couldn't maintain her balance.

Seeing sempai about to slam into the wall, I subconsciously reached my hand out to brace her.

"Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah. Anyway...what's going on?"

PAAMM!! With a crisp sound. All the lights on the corridor became red. Then, the holographic screens in the air showed **Emergency Situation Alert** as a broadcast was aired.

"ALL STUDENTS ARE TO EVACUATE UNDERGROUND! I REPEAT, ALL STUDENTS—KYAAAAHHH!?"

The teacher who was making the emergency broadcast got interrupted suddenly.

And then, another powerful attack shook the school, shaking it left and right.

"WHA-WHAT JUST HAPPENED...!?"

"ORIMURA-SENSEI!"

Maya ran down the corridor, and finally found Chifuyu.

"Yamada-sensei, what's the situation? What happened ?"

"IT'S AN AT-ATTACK! PLE-PLEASE LOOK AT THIS! "

Panting really hard, Maya pulled out the portable terminal, and the screen clearly showed the 'enemy' image the arena camera took.

"This is...!?"

"Ye-Yes! The same unmanned drones like before—no, it looks like they're more developed!"

"Numbers!?"

"5 of them! Appearing from all the arena pits at high speed! They're attacking students with Personal ISes!"

On hearing Maya's words, Chifuyu's changed her expression.

"Damn it...this is too early...'that thing' still can't be used..."

"Huh?"

Maya was a little surprised by Chifuyu's little muttering.

However, it seemed that she muttered that subconsciously. Chifuyu again shut her mouth, her hasty mannerism wasn't like her at all.

"O-Orimura-sensei! What do we do!?"

Maya earnestly looked up at Chifuyu.

Chifuyu was the one in charge of IS Academy's **Unexpected Event Response Command**, and the reason was because she was crowned the world's strongest **Brunhild**.

"How's each section doing?"

"Like last time, they're in the highest level lockdown."

"Got it. The teachers should put priority on evacuating the students. Also, gate system lockdown is to be removed. Teaching staff are to get ready to attack. Level 3 armaments, 2-man cells as defensive lines."

"Un-Understood."

Maya straightened her back as she answered, and then ran to the hangar to get her machine.

Seeing that figure leave, Chifuyu suddenly punched the wall viciously.

"That was really daring...but, you underestimated us."

Chifuyu's eyes looked like they were burning as she muttered softly but clearly.

"KOOOYAAAAAHHHH!!!!"

KLANG!

The [Souten Gatetsu] launched an attack and continued on with another as Rin slammed the attacker—the black IS away.

Rin was really excited over repaying the debt. In contrast, the opponent just responded with a presence an unmanned machine would have.

"—"

The black IS was called [Golem III].

It was far stronger than the one that appeared before, and the shield expanded greater.

In contrast to the metallic giant-like [Golem I], [Golem III] looked more like an iron girl. It looked just like a black model.

The pitch black armor was neatly arranged, outlining the female armor.

The head had complex eye lens on it, and to obtain a wider range of view, the visor-shaped eyeline was changed to become a ram's horn Hyper Sensor as it charged in.

And the parts that changed the most were definitely the arms.

The area under the right elbow became a huge blade, and possessed strong combat capaibility.

In contrast, the left arm used the same design as [Golem I]. It was a huge arm, but the modifications on the hand had 4 high intensity infrared lasers, and the cannons opened up in black holes like the caves of hell.

"You recovered and forgot all about your scars, right?"

The [Impact Cannons] on the shoulders [Dragon's Roar] opened.

In the battle at the narrow pit, she used the maximum force to blow the [Golem III] up—or that was what was supposed to happen.

"__"

However, ball-shaped things formed around the machine, raising a powerful energy shield to defend against the [Impact Cannons].

"What the heck, you! You're more of a defensive type compared to before!?"

"Rin-san, get down!"

On hearing that voice, Rin hurriedly dived.

Cecilia flew quickly above her, spun to stop in mid-air, and fired the [Starlight MKIII] a few times.

"Damn it! This shield's really hard!... However!"

The BITs that floated nearby fired at the same time, and all the beams shot off in the wrong direction.

"I definitely won ♪"

Swoosh. Cecilia flicked her finger in mid-air. At that moment, the beams created a huge refraction, firing at the blind spots of the ummanned machine. This was the BT weapons' attribute, Psycho Sympathy [Flexible] [7D 7].

"—"

Sensing that there was no time to deploy the Shield Unit, the [Golem III]'s body danced in mid-air.

"What!?"

Because it was an unmanned unit, the body could do all sorts of complicated movements. And then, using precise thruster control, it dodged all the attacks.

"Ar-Are you kidding me!? Such defensive ability and mobility!? And—"

The [Golem III] stretched its left arm towards Rin and Cecilia. The cannons were loaded, and beams started firing.

"Such tremendous firepower..."

DOOONNN!!!

An explosion once again shook the pit.

"What's with this thing!?"

The [Golem III] that destroyed the ceiling accelerated and leaped at Laura.

The huge arm wrapped around Laura's head, and then exerted force onto its fingers. The sensors on the head let out a sharp shrill, and the irritating alarm came. Still not understanding the situation, Laura quickly made a decision to get away from the bind, so she activated her left plasma saber.

(I'll slice the arm together with it!)

Thinking about that, Laura quickly swung at it, but she got unexpectedly blocked by the right arm of the [Golem III].

"What!?"

--Not good!

Just when she was thinking that, her partner's reliable voice was heard.

"Laura!"

It was Charlotte. The .69 caliber Pile Bunker [Grey Scale] opened from the shield on the left arm.

"Damn it!"

DOONKK!!!!

After a huge explosion, the [Golem III]'s left arm separated from Laura.

But just when that arm separated, Laura saw a burning laser about to shoot out from the palm cannon.

"CHARLOTTE!"

"GET DOWN!"

Charlotte, who slid in between the [Golem III] and Laura, immediately used her specialty [Rapid Switch] to summon three heavy physical shields.

"Kuu..."

Even if it was the [Revive]'s sturdy physical shields, three heavy ones in fact, it couldn't defend against the attack completely. The few infrared lasers that went through grazed Charlotte's right arm.

"Cha-Charlotte!"

"I-I'm alright...I just got a bit of shield energy eaten off.
"

"Unforgivable. YOU BASTAARRRDD!!!"

Laura adamantly took off her left eyepatch, and just when the [Golem III], assisted by the support sensor to increase the firing speed, was about to fire the golden light, Laura used [AIC] at maximum power to attack the [Golem III].

"BLOW TO BITS!!!"

The large caliber of Gatling fire created a waltz of explosions and booms.

"UOOOOOHHH!!!"

"Laura, no! Get down!"

Charlotte's shout seemed distant, and just when this voice reached, Laura was shocked by the [Golem III] that closed in immediately.

"[Ignition Boost]? And this efficiency—"

The blade stabbed into Laura.

"LLAAAAUUUUURRRAAAAA!!!"

"Ahh...what do we do?"

Saying this in a completely unenthusiastic tone was the 3rd year Daryl Cayce. Though she deployed her IS [Hellhound Ver 2.5], she was completely unarmed.

"Please, sempai!"

Saying that and making a victory pose was the 2nd year, Forte Sapphire. She intended to let her partner handle the unmanned pilot. Though she summoned her IS [Cold Blood], she was just using the [PIC] to float and flip in the air instead of fighting.

"Damn you, Forte. Is that an attitude you should have to your sempai?"

"What are you saying? You should be treating your kouhai gently."

On a side note, just when both of them were bickering, the [Golem III] fired the high intensity laser over.

"Oh my. That seems hot. Hey, go check it out."

"No way. Sempai, please dye your skin brown."

Evade, defend, deflect, spin, sink, stop.

Both of them seemed to be giving a little attitude, but in fact, they were making a bronze wall like defense.

This pair's combination was called [Aegis]. Combining the specialties of both pilots into one to block all attacks.

"Ah, oh my."

"Hiii."

Couldn't hit, couldn't hit, couldn't hit. There wouldn't be any damage even when they were hit.

"But Forte."

"What is it, Daryl-sempai?"

"It'll continue if we don't attack."

"You're right."

Facing the sudden slash in from the blade, both of them easily dodged aside.

Those eyes gradually narrowed.

"Then, let's..."

"...Give it a counterattack."

PANK!

The flying kicks, that looked like twin axes swinging in , landed on the [Golem III]'s body.

"Ah-Ahh...Ah..."

Facing the sudden attacker, Kanzashi couldn't even deploy her IS, let alone come up with some plan.

Unable to grit her teeth as she let out a cry, she backed away in fear.

(Wha...What...What, is this...?)

Fear, overwhelming fear disrupted all of Kanzashi's thoughts.

"Hii...!?"

The legs that were backing away stopped as they got blocked by the wall.

Kanzashi trembled as she looked at the wall behind her before slowly looking back in front again.

"—"

The pitch black unmanned machine [Golem III] was closing in step by step, seeing the IS on Kanzashi's right hand that was in standby phase.

(Some...one. Somebody, save me...!)

She forcefully closed her eyes, praying hard as if she was trying to grasp for a miracle.

If a hero was here, he would definitely save her.

That perfect hero who would come with the wind and rip the darkness apart would definitely appear.

"—"

But reality couldn't be like dreams and anime.

One step, and another, the [Golem III] closed in on Kanzashi.

"...ri-mu...ra...ku..."

The left arm of the [Golem III] slowly stretched over.

Just when its fingertips were about to touch Kanzashi, Kanzashi screamed out—

"ORIMURA-KKKUUUNNNN!!!"

BEEPP—

She thought she saw a crack appear in the wall behind her, and the next moment, it got ripped apart.

"KANZASHIIII!!!!"

"!!Orimura-kun...Orimura-kun, you're here..."

Rushing through the smoke and appearing in front of her was Ichika, undoubtedly a hero.

The hero Kanzashi always wanted.

(Orimura-kun...)

"UOOOOOOHHHHH!!!"

Ichika destroyed the wall and entered the pit, reaching his left hand out at the [Golem III] and letting the particle cannon gather energy to fire.

"Ch!!"

But the [Golem III] also used the left hand to fire high intensity infrared lasers, and the two energies collided in mid-air, causing a huge explosion.

"Kanzashi, activate your IS, quick! Or else you're going to get caught in the explosion!"

"Ye-Yes!"

Kanzashi's body's covered in light, and [Uchigane Nishiki] was deployed.

Simultaneously, Ichika continued to fight with the [Golem III].

"This guy's hits are really heavy."

Although he was swinging his [Yukihira Nigata] in his right hand and [Setsura] modified into a blade in his left

hand, the [Golem III] blocked them all with its gigantic left hand.

"Ku...looks like I can't do this alone...Kanzashi!"

"Wha-What?"

"Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah."

Kanzashi immediately and hurriedly checked her systems. The energy levels were rising in her, and each of the parameters was showing OK.

(I-I...)

--Want to fight together!

The moment she prayed for that, the energy levels rose tremendously in the [Uchigane Nishiki] as if it was responding to Kanzashi's wishes.

"Let's go, [Uchigane Nishiki]!"

Giii!!

Ichika's blade was deflected away, and he pulled his distance. Kanzashi flew into the gap like a tagout as she rushed to the [Golem III]. The rapid-fire particle cannons on her back, [Shunrai][7D 8] deployed under her armpits as they were aimed at the incoming enemy.

"I won't miss if it's this close!"

At such a close distance, the particle cannons fired out.

"!?"

But Kanzashi's attack got blocked completely by the changeable shield units of the [Golem III] that were floating around.

"Get back, Kanzashi!"

"Wha-What do we do?"

As Ichika supported her with fire, Kanzashi obeyed and pulled her distance from the [Golem III].

"In such a narrow space, [Uchigane Nishiki] can't use its attribute."

"Bu-But, the protective barrier of the arena was activated."

"Oh yeah. The protective barrier of the arena was sliced apart by [Reiraku Byakuya]. We can go out to fight from that gap."

"I-I understand."

"Then, keep attacking at close range."

Ichika maintained his position so that he could activate [Reiraku Byakuya] as he wielded [Yukihira Nigata] at a low position.

At the same time, Kanzashi summoned her close ranged equipment—the ultra-vibration halberd [Trance][7D 9] and held it tightly with both hands.

"Let's go."

"Y-Yeah!"

[Byakushiki] and [Uchigane Nishiki]— both machines activated the large thrusters on the shoulder wings as Ichika and Kanzashi flew forward.

"HAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

GLANG!!

Houki used the swords in both hands as she swung them each, but they got blocked by the [Golem III]'s right arm. The deflection caused its body to slant slightly, but it immediately used [PIC] to support itself and regain position. However, Tatenashi didn't let such an opening slip.

"Got you."

The unique aqua nanomachines caused the water to move at high frequencies, and the water spun around her to form a lance-shaped weapon [Heavy Rain][7D 10] as she aimed at the body of the [Golem III]'s body, concentrating on a single point to thrust in.

But just millimeters from when it was about to be pierced through, that lance got held by the huge left hand.

"Houki-chan! Use the [Fold-Out Armor] on your back! Push me!"

"Go-Got it!"

The water lance's spinning ability got maximized. As a loud rubbing sound could be heard, the [Golem III]'s arm got worn away little by little.

"Ku! How hard is the armor it uses!"

"Tatenashi-san! I'm going!"

"Okay!"

With Houki's [Akatsubaki] pushing hard, Tatenashi and the [Golem III] approached the gate of the arena.

"—"

The three ISes continued to accelerate.

Even though Tatenashi's [Mysterious Lady] and Houki's [Akatsubaki] were alerting them that they were too close to the gate of the arena, both of them completely ignored it.

"Take this!"

Tatenashi increased the force on the lance, activating the other armament on the [Heavy Rain], as a 4-barrel Gatling gun fired.

The [Golem III] was about to use the malleable shield to defend as a single unit, but it was pressed onto the gate of the arena by the front impact.

"Ku!"

The impact that came from the front and the powerful thrust behind pancaked Tatenashi, who grimaced with pain.

"Tatenashi-san!"

"I'm alright! Right now, we need to destroy that unmanned armor!"

"Bu-But...!"

"Okay okay, get to work."

On hearing Tatenashi grunt, Houki was surprised for a while, then increased the output of the [Fold-Out Armor] on her back.

"Gu-uu..."

A huge pressure could be felt from behind.

But even so, Tatenashi didn't stop her attack. The water lance and the Gatling gun mounted on it did damage the [Golem III], as sparks continued to fly.

"Tatenashi-san!"

"Fu-Fufu...not over yet. Onee-san's just getting started."

Tatenashi supported the lance she was wielding with both hands with her left hand only, and reached with her right hand above.

"Take this, the biggest firepower of [Mysterious Lady]...!"

Water gathered around Tatenashi's palm.

All the water on the [Mysterious Lady] was gathered, forming something.

"Th-This is...?"

"By gathering all the aqua nanomachines that were normally defending on the surface of the armor at a single point to attack, I can release a deathblow. It's called—"

—[Lance of Mistilteinn][7D 11]

This armament used every nanomachine's ultra-vibration to destroy. No matter how strong the armor was, it was as feeble as paper before it.

And the nanomachines that enter the enemy's armor could use energy transfer to trigger a large explosion. The total energy would be equivalent to 4 mini gas bombs. It really was the final deathblow.

Perhaps feeling the flow of energy, the [Golem III] hacked its large blade at Tatenashi. However, Tatenashi had no defense or resistance as she was setting up the [Lance of Mistilteinn], and was thus wide open to attacks.

"Ku...AAHHH!!"

Tatetanshi's IS armor got wrecked as the weapon broke through the Absolute Barrier and sliced the skin.

Blood flowed as Tatenashi continued to take the one-sided beatdown. But that smile didn't disappear.

"Houki-chan."

"Ah, yes!"

"Set all of your [Fold-Out Armor] to defense, or else you're going to get caught in this."

"Okay...Ta-Tatenashi-san?"

"Fufu, this onee-san's an immortal."

Tatenashi smiled radiantly at Houki.

Joking around like usual, carefreely, Tatenashi's smile would definitely not disappear.

"Here I go...!"

"No-NOOO! DO YOU WANT TO DIE, TATENASHI-SAANN!!?"

Tatenashi didn't answer. Instead, she just smiled.

--The [Lance of Mistilteinn] was activated.

DOGAAAAAANNNNKKKKK!!!!

"Wha-What just happened!?"

Having managed to escape from the 3rd Arena, Kanzashi and I were attracted by the sudden explosion on the gate opposite.

"Is that, Houki and the rest...?"

We opened the IS private communication channel, but nobody responded. It seems like the unmanned machines were giving off interfering electronic signals since just now.

"Orimura-, kun...!"

"Uwah!"

After being tugged by Kanzashi, I spun in the air. The next moment, a high-intensity laser shot over.

"Ku! How stubborn!"

"I'll take him...!"

"Kanzashi!? Don't force yourself!"

"Orimura-kun, check the situation at the gate... on the other side..."

"Go-Got it!"

Kanzashi began fighting with the unmanned machine, and I headed towards the gate that's giving off lots of smoke.

(Houki! Tatenashi-san! You must be safe!)

As I approached the gate, my Hyper Sensors detected an IS.

"Are you alright?"

--But what appeared from the smokescreen was the left arm of an unmanned machine.

"Guah!?"

My left leg got grabbed by an unmanned suit. Though I immediately used my thrusters to try and escape, the unmanned suit grabbed my leg tightly and used an exaggerated strength to slam me hard onto the wall.

"GAAAH!"

Pain went through me—hold on. [Absolute Defense] can't be broken through so easily.

(Don't tell me, this guy!?)

I immediately opened the IS Status Panel.

[Confirming that enemy IS' arm is releasing an unknown energy. Shield deployment got interrupted]—

(Like that!? This IS' an anti-IS?)

No matter what, the IS armor is made of an incomparable metal.

However, it's not hard to...kill the pilot's body.

"Damn, you...!"

I use the thruster on my right leg to forcefully stand up before hacking at it with [Yukihira Nigata].

But my attack got blocked by the right arm's blade.

"!!"

The unmanned machine spun me around and threw me to the inside wall of the arena.

"GYAAAHHH!!!"

That indescribable impact that spread from behind me suffocated me, and the pain went through my entire body. With a moan, I choked out blood.

(No, not good! It'll be over if I lose consciousness! Got to get ready—)

I gritted my teeth so hard I felt like they were going to be crushed. Then I quickly deployed the wing thrusters to get away from the rubble.

"Ahh—"

The infrared laser attacked me from in front of my eyes.

(No, I can't...beat it alone...!)

The halberd slash, the particle cannon shots, Kanzashi used these two things to engage in a fierce battle with the [Golem III]. However, no matter whether it was the technical ability or the response, the enemy machine was always better as it started to gain advantage.

(Ku!)

Due to the strong interference, she still couldn't use the private channel.

Thus, she didn't know how the situation was with Ichika, who had gone to the gate to check.

"—"

The [Golem III] high intensity infrared lasers poured down like rain.

Kanzashi quickly exerted the boosters on her legs to the maximum and evaded the attack.

"—!?"

While backing away from the rubble in front of her, the aquamarine-colored armor that she knew entered her eyesight.

She couldn't be mistaken. It was the [Mysterious Lady] Kanzashi's sister, Sarashiki Tatenashi piloted.

"U...! ...!"

Seized by unrest, Kanzashi switched the Hyper Sensor into super sensitive mode.

(Where...? Where is it...?)

The irritating feeling couldn't be shaken away, and cold sweat broke out inexplicably as her heart pounded like crazy.

"!!"

Tatenashi was there.

Her armor was badly wrecked, and there was almost none of it left.

Tatenashi was lying there motionlessly, perhaps due to the grave injuries.

(N...o... Lie...That's a lie...)

She wanted to scream, but she couldn't let her voice out.

She wanted to shout that name out, but her mouth couldn't move.

--The world around her immediately distorted.

It's disgusting.

It's disgusting.

*It's disgusting It's disgusting It's disgusting

"__"

The unmanned machine that was unable to speak had a visor, a bodyline that was refined like a girl, a large left arm that didn't match it and a slender right arm that looked refined.

All this.

--IT'S DESPICABLE!

"...I'll...destroy you..."

Kanzashi murmured blankly, but this voice had unrivaled determination—no, killing intent in it.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!"

Deploying her wing thrusters, Kanzashi exerted the maximum output and used [Ignition Boost].

Firing one shot after another, Kanzashi raised both hands over her head and hacked the halberd at the [Golem III].

--*GLINGGG!!!*

A sharp metallic sound echoed out, and the halberd that was sliced by the blade spun in the air.

But even so—

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!"

Kanzashi was so agitated that she couldn't calm down.

She quickly readied both particle cannons and shot wildly at close range.

DONK! *DONK!* *DONK!*

The [Golem III] continued to back away under the impact of the cannons, and Kanzashi pressed on as she closed in and continued firing.

"Un...forgive-able..."

Fire.

Fire, fire, fire.

Fire, fire, fire, fire, fire.

She continued to fire without letting the malleable shield units interfere.

The sturdy [Golem III] armor finally broke and revealed the core.

(If I break this...!)

--*KACHANK!* Just when Kanzashi saw a ray of success, a mechanical sound brought reality crashing down on Kanzashi cruelly.

She ran out of particle cannon energy.

"Ah-Ahh..."

She prayed as she squeezed the trigger, but the particle cannon couldn't be shot.

Click *click*. Only that merciless sound was left for Kanzashi.

"U—!?"

Lifting her head up, the [Golem III] was right in front of her.

Trembling and unable to move, Kanzashi got swept aside horizontally by the blade.

"Au!"

Kanzashi, who was beaten to the ground, remained in that position as she summoned her console.

(A-Anything I can use, weapons...what...what...)

Gaching *gaching*. Her teeth let out an unharmonious tune in fear. While unable to calm her trembling body down, she still checked on the machine's situation.

(8 rapid-fire guided missiles [Mountain Storm][7D 12]... But...this...)

Most likely, with such powerful interference, a normal lock-on system couldn't chase it effectively.

No matter how potent the explosives were, they were pointless if they didn't hit.

(But...if Orimura-kun can hold off the enemy...maybe...)

Just when such a thought appeared.

DONG! A huge explosion could be heard.

"Huh...?"

Ichika was thrown beside her.

There were lots of scratches all over his armor, and it didn't look like he could hang on for long.

The other [Golem III] that rushed over went beside Ichika and grabbed his head.

"St...op, it..."

Kanzashi tried to shout as tears dripped down her face .

(It's, impossible...As expected, it's impossible...after all. ..Someone, like me...)

Kanzashi hated herself for being unable to take revenge for Tatenashi and only able to hit the ground weakly.

But she didn't even have the guts to stand up.

It's scary. It's scary. She wouldn't even lift her head up.

(Orimura-kun...I'm sorry...)

I'm sorry for pairing up with you.

I'm sorry for being unable to save you.

I'm sorry for being completely useless.

I'm sorry—that I was even born.

"Uu...uuuu..."

Kanzashi felt really lousy, and now, she just prayed to hurry up and disappear.

And then, thinking about it unknowingly, she finally realized.

--There's no such thing as a hero in this world.

Thinking about this, there was only despair in her future.

"—"

The [Golem III] was closing in slowly.

It raised its blade, and swung it down.

This movement looked really slow for some reason, and Kanzashi just looked at it, forgetting to even close her eyes.

(Ahh...)

I'll most likely die now.

Thinking that, everything else became meaningless.

A meaningless life, a boring time.

Everything and anything would vanish in the next few seconds.

"..."

She didn't feel relieved.

Neither did she feel fear.

She just felt completely empty.

ZOOM...

"—Huh?"

The blade didn't land on Kanzashi, and the figure that appeared in front of her hugged her as if it wanted to protect her.

Tightly, it hugged her tightly.

"Onee...chan...?"

The figure hugging her tightly was Tatenashi.

She used the last ounce of her strength to fly over and protect her imouto with her body.

And blood spilled out as she took a slash on her back.

"Onee..."

She called out softly, and Tatenashi's body fell.

"ONEE-CHAN! ONEE-CHAN!!"

Kanzashi hugged Tatenashi, who collapsed onto the floor, and shook her body. The warm blood covered Kanzashi's hands.

"No...don't...onee-chaaan..."

"Aha...how many years, has it been, since you last called me that...?"

"Onee..."

Tatenashi smiled.

She looked really happy, as if the only thing that made her relax was that her little sister was okay.

"Why...must you...do that?"

"To save my sister. Do I need a reason...?"

"But! But...it-it's useless..."

"Useless...of course not."

"It's useless! There's no such thing as a hero in this world!"

"Is that so...?"

Smiling no matter when, Tatenashi was always so gentle.

"But...but...!"

Kanzashi still couldn't hold her tears back.

Seeing her little sister like this, Tatenashi gave a 'Really , you...' look as she gently stroked Kanzashi's head.

"...It's not, useless..."

"Huh...?"

It sounded soft, but she could hear it clearly. It was Ichika's voice.

"A flawless...hero, it doesn't exist..."

Ichika's head continued to be grabbed by the [Golem III], and his arms and legs swayed lifelessly.

However, that voice became even more forceful.

"A flawless hero like that...would never cry, and would never smile..."

Gugugugugu. Ichika exerted strength into his body and tried to stand up.

Right now, he was embittered, tattered, awkward-looking, and pathetic. However—this figure looked even more dazzling than anything else.

"Therefore. I!"

BEEP!

The finger on the left hand [Setsura] released an energy claw.

Then, he slashed the arm of the [Golem III] that was binding him.

"I'm a human. I can cry, I can laugh, and I do fail. However—I won't give up! I won't run away from a battle. THAT'S WHAT A HUMAN IS!"

The [Golem III] that was counterattacked suddenly pulled its distance.

"HOUKKKKKIIII!!!!!"

"LEAVE IT TO MEEE!!"

[Akatsubaki], which finally recovered from the close-ranged explosion, appeared and broke through like the wind..

"Tatenashi-san's attack should have worn the shields out. "

Using [Fold-Out Armor]'s thrusters to close the distance, Houki kept her body low.

"—"

JYAGINK!! A sharp metallic breaking sound could be heard. [Golem III] was sliced in half right down the middle, and it exploded.

"Are you alright, Ichika?"

"—Watch your back, Houki!"

"What!?"

Another [Golem III] that still had some energy left in it rushed at Houki.

"GAAH!"

Houki was slammed to the ground, and she hurriedly got up, changed directions, and left that position with her booster.

But the accurate hits came at Houki.

"Damn it. If this keeps up, Houki will...!"

Ichika opened his wing thrusters as he tried to fly.

But he was stopped by Kanzashi's voice.

"Wa-Wait...!"

"Kanzashi...?"

"Wait...don't go. You...your IS, it's...at its limit..."

"No way. I need to go save Houki."

"Wh-Why...? Are, aren't you...afraid of...death...?"

Seeing Kanzashi look so troubled, Ichika curled his lips up.

"Of course I'm scared."

"If that's the case...why...?"

"Well, I'm more afraid to run than to fight."

"Huh...?"

"If I run, I feel that I won't ever be myself again."

It's a declaration full of decisiveness.

To Kansashi, whether it was the emboldened words or the faith that matched it, they didn't exist anymore.

"Then, I'm going."

Summoning [Yukihira Nigata], Ichika increased the output of the wing thrusters to the maximum and flew off.

"Why..."

Staring blankly at Ichika's back as he left, tears welled up in Kanzashi's eyes.

--It's alright if I can be that strong.

--It's alright if I have the courage to fight.

--Me, me, me.

--Alright, alright, alright.

"I..."

The tears landed on Tatenashi's face.

"I'm really a coward..."

She kept thinking of reasons not to fight, yet she didn't take a step out.

Weak, ugly, cowardly, and unreasonable.

"I...really can't, do this...onee-chan..."

Crying could be heard.

She felt so unhappy that she wanted to go crazy, yet she couldn't move.

"You're not useless."

"Huh...?"

Kanzashi felt that she heard Tatenashi's voice, and thus hurriedly looked at her chest.

However, Tatenashi, who lost consciousness, didn't move at all.

"What's so bad about it? Weak, ugly, cowardly, and unreasonable. Who made us humans anyway?"

That's right. It was Tatenashi's voice.

Is that the illusion that normally happened?

But this voice that touched her heart was filled with warmth.

"Therefore, Kanzashi-chan. Just be weak, just smile. Accept all these. Once you accept that, you can stand up, because..."

"I-I'm human...?"

"That's right. And also—you're the little sister I'm so proud of."

Gently. It felt that she was gently smiling back.

"..."

Kanzashi put Tatenashi softly onto the floor, not moving away as she stood up on both legs.

"I'm going...onee-chan."

Her tears, they weren't flowing anymore.

"Are you alright, Houki!?"

I continued to hack at the unmanned machine, and slid my body in to protect Houki.

"Ichika!? Yo-You idiot! Who'd rush in like that at such a state!?"

It's true that [Byakushiki]'s completely battered.

And with the [Absolute Defense] being disrupted by that unmanned machine. The pain on the flesh pricked at me.

"So can I leave it like this?"

"Wha-What?"

"—Houki, I'll protect you."

"U...!!"

That's right. I'll protect.

Houki, Tatenashi-san, Kanzashi.

"WHAT KIND OF GUY AM I IF I CAN'T PROTECT MY FRIENDS!!"

GALINK!!

I forcefully pressed my blade down and used the momentum to spin and slash at the unmanned machine itself.

(--Too shallow!)

This slash didn't cause fatal damage to the enemy. In my haste, I overdid it.

"Ichika! Danger!!"

Houki used her body to knock me away, and then she got bathed by the attack of the infrared lasers.

"AAAHHHHH!!"

"HOUKI!"

"Fu-Fu...this level, I can still..."

Perhaps intending to deal a fatal blow to Houki, the unmanned machine raised its blade.

"HOW CAN I LET YOU GET AWAY WITH THAAATT!!!"

I rushed into the unmanned machine's range and blocked the blade from below.

"Guuu...!!"

It was a heavy hit. And not just a simple slash, it also means that my IS energy's wearing out.

(Will...it end here? In this place, without knowing anything!?)

I gritted my teeth hard.

Mishi *mishi*. This creaking sound was either from [Byakshiki]'s armor or from my own bones. Gradually, I couldn't tell.

But, even so, I still...!

"I won't, admit defeat...GAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

I forced my blade back.

However, the next moment, the left arm of the unmanned machine stabbed over.

"Damn—"

I was ready to take damage.

--At that moment, a sudden explosion saved me. A figure flew by the unmanned machine, and it knocked the black frame off and pulled me away.

"Wha-What's going on?"

"ICHIKA, GET AWAY FROM THERE!"

It's a voice I've heard before.

But I'm somewhat shocked that it sounded clearer than ever, especially for such an appropriate occasion.

"Kanzashi..."

So—it seems that she can stand up, and come to help.

Thinking that, I couldn't help but be happy.

I was happy, so happy, that I started smiling.

"Do-Don't smile! HURRY UP!"

"Got it!"

I carried Houki and got away.

Then, [Uchigane Nishiki]'s guided missiles hit the unmanned machine continuously.

"—"

It used its energy shield to block it, but the unmanned machine's movements stopped completely.

Houki and I used this opening to get to Kanzashi.

"So it seems that that's still not enough...to beat it."

"Then what?"

"How about [Reiraku Byakuya]...?"

"No can do. I don't even have enough energy left."

Really, the situation's so critical that it's laughable.

But even so, neither Kanzashi nor I looked like we wanted to give up at all.

"We can recover the energy through my [Kenran Butou]..."

"Can you do it? [Akatsubaki] took quite a lot of damage."

"...I'm okay. But, I need some time."

"If that's the case...I'll, buy some time...during this time ."

Kanzashi automatically requested to fight.

Buy time. It sounds really simple, but this means that, until I recover, she would have to be a meat shield.

"No way. It's too dangerous."

"No time to hesitate...besides, there's, no other way..."

That's right. What Kanzashi said was true.

Right now, we're relying on [Uchigane Nishiki]'s guided missiles to hold down the opponent, but this isn't a long-term plan.

(If that's the case, I'll—)

Believe.

Kanzashi.

Houki.

Myself.

My friends.

Just pure belief.

"Tatenashi-san, I'll take revenge for you."

"Hey...don't just, kill me off like that..."

Severely injured, Tatenashi-san tried to get up. Her swaying body looked like it would collapse anytime, and I hurriedly supported it.

"This..."

"[Mysterious Lady]'s Aqua Crystal...?"

"It's a charm..."

I grabbed onto the thing that was given to me tightly.

"I understand...it's like a memento."

"...Ichika-kun. Once I'm all healed up, I'll definitely, definitely, beat you up violently."

Tatenashi-san said that with the blood drained off her face

But her face was still smiling.

It's weak, but it's an immovable smile.

"If that's the case, well."

"Let's try it."

"...Yes."

I, Houki, and Kanzashi all nodded our heads firmly.

Tatenashi-san gave a thumbs up, and said,

"Do your best, first years."

Having gotten the Student Council President's support , we immediately went into action.

(If I use the [Multi Lockon System], I can create...an opening to attack...for Ichika...)

However, [Uchigane Nishiki] which Kanzashi pilots doesn't have an automatic tracking function process on it.

(If that's the case—!!)

Kanzashi closed her eyes and gathered her concentration.

She then opened her eyes suddenly, and the armor on the arms and legs scattered into light particles and disappeared.

The 20 digits of hers that were released seemed to be confirming their existence as they move about.

"I can do it...[Uchigane Nishiki], manual guided system...activate, 48 shots salvo."

Floating with the power of the [PIC], Kanzashi opened her arms wide like a Saint bearing the cross.

Holographic keyboards appeared at her digits, one above and one below at all the limbs.

The 5 digits of her hands and feet were assigned 2 ball-shaped keyboards each, 8 keyboards altogether, and she started entering all the information manually.

"Atmospheric conditions...mobility of each missile, time lag...interference between the explosions. Should be able to create an offensive power large enough..."

Several windows opened up in front of Kanzashi.

In other words, she was guiding each of the 48 hi-capability missiles manually.

"Suu...haaa..."

She inhaled some air, and exhaled it.

She cleared her thoughts, gathered her concentration to the maximum, and then—

"Can you run away from this [Mountain Storm]...?"

The 6 missile covers on the wing thrusters on her shoulders slid open.

In the meantime, the 6 groups of 8 consecutive shots were formed by particles, and all 48 shots were ready to be fired.

"Give me your strength, [Uchigane Nishiki]!"

DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON DON!

With booming sounds, the missiles flew out at the same time.

"Direct link, check...! Manual lock, start...!"

The missiles rushed at the [Golem III].

This time, it flew in differently, using complex 3-dimensional movements to close in at a fast rate.

"—"

The [Golem III] deployed the malleable shield, and intended to shoot down the missiles with its left arm.

However, the guided missiles that were supported manually dodged and accelerated like the [Golem III] as they changed directions and accelerated, thoroughly crushing the middle of the malleable shield units.

Having lost its defensive ability, the [Golem III] hurriedly used its thrusters to back away. However, it didn't get a chance to rest, as the next wave of missiles came roaring like wolves.

The legs, arms, shoulders, waist, head, abdomen. It got swallowed by the storm of explosions caused by the missiles.

"—"

But even in this situation, the [Golem III] still wanted to change the situation and gathered all its energy on the left arm. It wanted to shoot the infrared lasers at Kanzashi, who was defenseless as she controlled the missiles.

"I WON'T LET YOU!!"

Appearing in front of Kanzashi was Houki.

She raised her arms forward, deployed her [Fold-Out Armor], and created a powerful energy shield, blocking all the infrared lasers.

At the same time, the [Golem III] changed the infrared lasers to high-efficiency rapid-fire as it tried to break through Houki's shield.

"Ku! [Akatsubaki]! Show it to me, your strength!"

As if responding to Houki, the shoulder unit on [Akatsubaki] slid open.

That shape looked like a huge crossbow with an arrow on it.

"What, is this...?"

The panel that suddenly popped out showed this message.

«Experience level gained to a certain value. Construction of new equipment is complete. Variable output Blaster Rifle [Thousand Pierces][7D 13]. It's an outstanding piercing armament with the largest firing range—»

"Alright! Enough with the ridiculous explanation!"

Shutting the window, Houki kept her shields open and bent down.

--This is a weapon that could vary its output. It's unlikely to hit without using all the [PIC].

Without knowing why, Houki understood it all, and summoned the scope on her right-eye.

"I'll take your left arm."

BEEEEEEPPPP!!!

Using her [Fold-Out Armor] like usual, the crimson red energy bullet was shot out under huge compression.

The attack came from the shoulders on both sides, and it rushed forward with shockingly scorching heat that burned the land, and the [Golem III]'s left arm was blown away.

"—"

But since it was an unmanned machine, it wouldn't feel pain.

The [Golem III] barely tried to support the body that lost balance, and used [Ignition Boost] to rush at Houki.

"...I'll leave it to you."

"Okay!"

Flying above Houki's head, Ichika used [Ignition Boost] to enter the battle.

Wielding [Yukihira Nigata] in his right hand, he let out the extremely powerful energy of [Reiraku Byakuya].

"UOOOOOOHHH!!!"

The [Golem III] used the blade on it's right side to slash to the left.

And Ichika used both hands to raise the blade above his head, exerting all his strength into it.

KLANG...

"—"

The [Golem III]'s blade got destroyed by Ichika's [Yukihira Nigata].

"It's over now!"

Using a horizontal slash, he ripped the [Golem III]'s hard armor to reveal the core in it.

Ichika used all his strength in his left hand to smash the block-shaped object that was glowing golden, and the [Golem III] was knocked aside.

"—"

The core of the IS was made of 'A Rare Metal'. Though it was supported with a power assist, it wasn't something that could be destroyed with one hit.

However—

"It's a charm."

Between the core and the parts was an object that was flashing.

It's actual name was [Aqua Crystal], and it had the functions of the [Aqua Nanomachines]. It was the IS [Mysterious Lady]'s armament.

And naturally, the pilot is—

"Fuu..."

Sarashiki Tatenashi.

Though all blurry due to the severe loss of blood, that hand of hers raised up to the sky, and the movements of the fingers looked like they were holding a switch.

"*Kachink*."

Tatenashi pressed the finger.

The next moment, [Golem III] was absorbed by the explosion within, and vanished without a trace.

.

"Yeah..."

Using her last ounce of strength, Tatenashi gave a thumbs up.

Seeing her like this, Ichika, Houki and Kanzashi all looked like it couldn't be helped, gave thumbs up—and started smiling.

"Un..."

Her consciousness still blurry, Tatenashi slowly blinked twice.

The white ceiling's dyed orange.

"O-Onee-chan..."

Tatenashi turned to the voice who called her.

Kanzashi was probably waiting for Tatenashi to recover, and stood up from the chair

"Are you, awake...?"

"Yes... This is...?"

Tatenashi still wasn't fully awake, and she asked Kanzashi in a somewhat dazed tone.

"The school's, medical office..."

"Not the infirmary...owowoww."

Her mind still blank, Tatenashi tried to stand up, but the moment she was about to do that, she was stopped by her pain and a panicking Kanzashi.

"You still can't move, yet...it's not fatal...but, your wounds aren't light..."

"Okay..."

After that, Tatenashi and Kanzashi continued to remain silent for a while.

--It had been a long time since the sisters had had such a conversation.

Both of them were thinking that.

The older sister who was always mindful of her younger sister's thoughts.

And the younger sister who feared the older sister.

However, those things felt like lies, and both of them naturally became silent.

(It's really thanks to Ichika...)

Tatenashi remembered about asking Ichika to pair up with Kanzashi.

Thinking about it, it was really strange.

(Why did I ask him in the first place...)

At that time, she didn't really realize something, but she just believed it.

That it'd be okay to leave it to him.

(Did I...)

Gradually, Tatenashi started to blush.

(Want to flirt around with him...)

Suddenly realizing that she started to blush, Tatenashi hurriedly turned to the window to avoid letting her younger sister detect it.

"Onee-chan..."

"Wha-What is it?"

"What happened...? Your face, it's red...?"

Not good. It seemed her agitation was about to show.

"Most likely due to the sunset..."

"Really...?"

Silence took place after that.

After about ten minutes, Kanzashi hesitated, and finally decided to say.

"We, erm, y'know...onee-chan..."

"Mn?"

"I'm sorry...for all this time..."

"Don't worry about that."

"Bu-But..."

She labeled others randomly, created a wall on her own, and kept running.

Facing herself like this, Kanzashi couldn't help but be so ashamed that she couldn't forgive herself.

"I'm...one useless imouto..."

"That's not true."

Tatenashi endured her pain and got up, hugging Kanzashi, who was about to cry out.

"You're my precious imouto. A very strong one, my younger sister—"

Kanzashi's head continued to be patted, and unable to take it any further, she teared up.

"Onee-chan...onee-chan..."

"Nn."

In the medical office with only two people, the sisters finally broke their frozen bond, and their souls finally interacted.

Only the sunset remained, watching over both of them silently.

"Hmm..."

Why did it end up like this?

"My turn. Yosh, 2 Fives."

"I'll put 2 Sevens then."

"Nuah! I wanted to put Seven!"

"Then, I'll pass."

"My turn? Then, I'll put two Aces."

Right now, Houki, Cecilia, Rin, Charl and Laura are playing Daihinmin[7D 14] in my room.

'As punishment for not pairing up with us, you must listen to one request from us'—just like that, the five of them requested this at the same time.

And my response was that I couldn't do that for 5 people, and so the winner will take it! Just like that, the victor would be decided by Daihinmin.

"I say, can't you settle this another day? A lot of things happened today. You must be really tired already, right? And you're all injured—WAU!"

A pillow got thrown over, and the one who threw that was Rin. It seemed that she threw that with her injured right hand as she let out a strange moan and squatted down. *What's she pulling now?*

"This little thing isn't much of an injury at all!"

"That's right! I hope you don't underestimate the Representative Cadets."

"Mn. Besides, there are things girls can't back away from."

"There's no one in our squad who'll waste time saying such nonsense about being treated as casualties with just this damage."

"Speaking of which! If you think that you are fine, be gentler to me! Get me juice! And snacks!"

Ahh, Rin revived.

But everyone's energetic, and I'm the one who was really injured.

"I-Ichika, if you're bored, please rub my shoulders..."

"Huh? Ahh, okay. I'm fine with it."

I answered Rin by nodding my head, and then went behind her back.

"Are your shoulders okay? Huh, uwah! Your cards are weak."

"Sh-Shut up! I'm starting a Grand Reversal. Just shut up and rub my shoulders!"

"Yes yes."

I really can't deal with her.

Thinking that as I was about to rub her shoulders, Charl's cry pierced into my ear.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHH!!! ICHIKA, YOU CAN'T! THE WINNER'S NOT DECIDED YET! YOU'RE REALLY SNEAKY, RIN!"

"THAT'S RIGHT! CHARLOTTE'S RIGHT! THIS IS FOR THE WINNER..."

"HUUH, SHUT UP! DON'T GET BETWEEN ME AND ICHIKA!"

"Stop joking around. Is your throat itching to be pierced through?"

In this ruckus, the 5 of them gradually had less cards.

Now, it's finally Charl's turn.

"Then...this!"

She showed 4 Eights...which means, that...!

"A REVOLUTION! NO—IT'S THE FRENCH REVOLUTION!"

""""ICCCHHHHIIKKKKAAAAA!!!!!!!!!""""

Everyone got really angry. Huh?

The intense poker card battle lasted late into midnight.

"..."

IS Academy, Underground Special Area—

In this place, of which only a handful amongst the teachers were aware of, Maya was analyzing the unmanned machines that were taken.

"How about you take a rest?"

"Ahh... Orimura-sensei."

Chifuyu walked into the room and threw a can of drink at Maya.

Tasting the Royal Milktea that was passed to her, Maya showed the investigation results on the screen.

"Please look. As expected, they're the upgraded versions of the unmanned machine that appeared before. I'm certain of it."

"And the cores?"

"According to the records before, they're still unregistered."

"...How many did you retrieve?"

"Two of them. The other cores were completely wrecked in battle...what do we do?"

After pondering for a while, Chifuyu answered simply .

"We'll report to the government that all the cores were destroyed."

"Bu-But, that'll mean—"

"Think about it. The IS cores are things any country would desire. If we hand them over, there'll be a lot of unnecessary conflicts."

Chifuyu sounded confident, but according to what she said, it'd mean that the Academy would be exposed to danger.

"..."

Seeing Maya remain silent, Chifuyu continued to remain optimistic.

"Hey hey. Who do you think I am? I was called the world's strongest before."

"Yes..."

"One Academy or two, I'll protect them."

Chifuyu curled her lips up slightly.

"—With my life on the line."

"...Fua, ngh...In the end, they couldn't settle the score. We were forced to stop since we disturbed others. Well, I don't really mind."

It'd been an entire night since the unmanned machines attacked, and I went to the sink in my room.

"Owowowow..."

My joints and bones hurt after just a little movement.

After that battle, I was treated, and found that I had 17 bruises, a scratched right shoulder, and two broken ribs.

(My body still hurts, but it's not so bad that I have to stay in the hospital. I need to go out today too.)

First, a trip to Ran's Saint Marianne's Academy for the School Festival, and then the dinner with Houki at the hotel.

Well, I need to check the transfer time.

KOK *KOK*.

"Hm?"

On hearing the knock on the door, I answered as I left the basin.

"Who's that—?"

"Yees, it's me!"

It's Yamada-sensei. She does feel really happy today. Is it because the breakfast was nice today?

They would switch menus everyday. The egg with natto set meal today was really good. Though Cecilia was staring at it with a look of complete disbelief when she saw that...it was really good.

"Orimura-kun!"

"Yes."

"You're going to be investigated!"

"...What?"

Erm, did I just hear that someone will be investigating me?

"The investigation will begin in 20 minutes. Please come over to the Student Counselling Room."

"Huh, well...I need to go out now."

"Huh? No way. We can't write a report if we don't understand the cause of this event. All personal IS pilots who were involved in the battle have to turn up, you know?"

"Then...how long will it take?"

"Yes! It's about 2 hours."

What? Two...hours?

"On a side note, what'll happen if I refuse?"

"Erm, you'll be kept under detention."

"By who?"

"The Government's IS branch."

Uwa—

"After that, you may end up having Orimura-sensei's personal counselling, you know?"

Personal counselling. Well...it's called counselling, but it's basically just training the students physically until they're completely worn out.

On a side note, those students who went out of the school on their own seemed to be saying that 'It's like hell on Earth' when they came back.

I don't want it. Definitely no way will I want it.

"Then, Orimura-kun, please don't be late."

"Ah—...yes..."

Having finished settling her stuff, Yamada-sensei took small steps and went away, *tatata*.

What do I do now...

(Anyway, better send a mail to Ran first.)

Will she be angry? I guess. Got to apologize to her first .

"Haa..."

After sighing, *KOK* *KOK*, another knocking on the door could be heard.

"Yamada-sensei?"

"E-Erm...!"

On opening the door, I found Kanzashi standing in front of me there.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"We-Well..."

"Ahh, do you have to come along with me for the investigations?"

"Y-Yes..."

It's really unbelievable to see Kanzashi calm down like this and think. Just when I thought of this, she suddenly glared at me. I think she said that she hated to be looked at by guys like that?

"I'll put on my clothes. Please hold on."

"A-Alright...I'll wait..."

Kanzashi nodded her head hard. She really looked completely different from when we first met.

Of course, it's for the better.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Then, let's go."

"Nn..."

I got out from the room and walked with Kanzashi side by side.

On a side note, it's now 9am.

"But it was really bad yesterday. Kanzashi, is your body okay?"

"I'm okay...I-Ichi-Ichika...how about you?"

It felt like she was a little awkward with calling my name. I don't think my name was something that hard to pronounce.

"I'm fine. No problem."

Let's leave it as that. In fact, I can still walk.

"How's Tatenashi-san?"

As she was sent to the Medical Office, Kanzashi followed her, so she should know.

"O-Onee-chan's...she-she needs to be monitored in the Medical Office for a while..."

In other words, she needs to be hospitalized, right? Well, I need to bring some visit gifts. What should I get?

"What does Tatenashi-san like?"

"Huh? Erm...Shogi[7D 15], I guess..."

"How refined."

However, she can't play Shogi alone. It'll cause disturbances in the patient's room. Better not get that.

While thinking about all this, Kanzashi raised her volume slightly.

"Are-Are you worried, about onee-chan's situation?"

"Hn? No, I'm just wondering about what kind of gift I should buy for her—"

"A, gift...?"

"Yup. It's a lonely life in a hospital, isn't it?"

"Ah...I see..."

Kanzashi looked like she heaved a sigh of relief.

(What's wrong? This Kanzashi.)

"A kendama."[7D 16]

"Huh?"

"It's better to give her a kendama. Onee-chan always liked to play with that."

Really? Well that was totally unexpected.

"And...hmm, how about I give her a knitting set?"

"Onee-chan, she's bad with..knitting."

"Huh!? That person has things she can't do...?"

Now that's really completely unexpected.

I really can't imagine seeing Tatenashi-san failing at blocks.

"Didn't you say it before... there are no flawless heroes, not in this world..."

"Well, I did say that."

Humans. We are incomplete, useless, weak, fleeting... that's why, we need to be stronger.

Become stronger, until we can smile.

Become stronger, until we can make anyone smile.

"I'll...bring books over..."

"I see. Then I'll bring a kendama along—no, wait. This is a good chance. I'll bring a knitting set over to train her. "

Actually, I just want to see Tatenashi-san flustered.

"Ichika..."

"Hn?"

"You're so evil..."

"Isn't this good? It'll be a little payback. She always messes around with me, you know."

"Fufu..."

Perhaps imagining how Tatenashi-san would tease me , Kanzashi gave an intriguing smile.

Walking with Kanzashi side by side, I smiled too.

Passing through the corridor that's somewhat empty due to the holidays, an inexplicable sense of solemnness seized me.

"Er-m...hey."

"?"

"Th-Thi-This is..."

Saying that, Kanzashi took out the carrier bag she'd been holding ever since she had been to my room.

"What's wrong?"

"Lo-Look...inside..."

"Oh."

After she said that, I peeked into the carrier bag.

There were a lot of anime DVDs inside, magical girls anime, robot anime, teenage love anime, and—hero anime.

"Oh, there're things I've seen before."

"Wh-Which ones?"

"Mn, this—you're too close!"

Kanzashi peered over to look, perhaps to hurry up and know the titles I watched.

At that moment, my face got stuck close to Kanzashi, and I hurriedly backed away.

"!! So-Sorry..."

"Ah, no...that's not something worth apologizing for."

Recently, Kanzashi's face felt like it had a gentle presence as compared to the first time we met. To be honest, it's cuter now.

"We-Well...if possible, I hope you...can look at it."

"Oh. I see a lot of interesting anime. I'll be taking them then."

While rummaging through the bag to arrange the items that were out of place, I asked something I was curious about.

"You like?"

"Huh..."

A somewhat shocked voice could be heard.

I couldn't see Kanzashi's face as I was arranging the stuff inside the bag.

"Y-Yes...I like..."

"Is that so—"

"..."

"Okay, that's all for the arranging. Besides, I did mess it up."

"..."

"Kanzashi? What's wrong?"

Kanzashi blushed as she looked down.

She was pinching her skirt hard.

"Erm, that..."

"Yes?"

Suu...haa...Kanzashi took a deep breath, and then lifted her head up.

"I...I LOVE (YOU)...!!!"[7D 17]

She suddenly shouted.

That voice echoed throughout the corridor. The girls who heard that all went 'What What What' as they came out of their rooms.

"Then, I'll be heading off...!"

With the people of the same gender looking at her, Kanzashi ran away.

"Er...m...?"

I got left behind. Anyway, let's go to the counselling room with the bag.

(I-I said it out...!)

Running down the corridor at full sprint, Kanzashi's ears got completely red.

--Ichika, who changed me.

--Ichika, who helped me.

--Ichika, who made me stronger.

I like that Ichika.

--I fell for him.

"..."

Either way, she really didn't understand much about crushes.

Her head was spinning inside like a Shepherd Dog.

(I-I-I'm not weird, right...? I didn't do anything weird, right...?)

She searched through her memory.

"Ah..."

The second time they met, she gave Ichika a vicious slap.

Looking at it now, that would have been a really fatal failure, on the same level as death.

(Ah-Ahh, I have to...apologize.)

Though she thought that, Ichika would definitely think 'Huh? You don't have to worry about that'.

But this is this, and that is that. To Kanzashi, she couldn't let it go if she didn't apologize.

(Bu-But, if I go back now...I'll definitely, be unable to say anything...)

Since this was the first time she confessed in her life, when she meets him again, she couldn't do it easily even if it wasn't much.

(An-And...)

She never said that she wanted to go out with him. She just said what she thought, so of course she wouldn't get a response.

Either way, he's that infamous 'Blockhead amongst Blockheads' Orimura Ichika.

(Bu-But, I did say...properly, that I liked him...)

KAAAA! Kanzashi's face got even redder as she continued to run down the corridor.

"—Huuh!?"

Why did she feel that the atmosphere felt weird?

She recalled the confession.

"You like?"

"Y-Yes...I like..."

"Is that so—"

...Huh? Kanzashi stopped in her tracks.

She thought through it carefully again.

They talked about anime.

↓

Do you like it?

↓

Yes, I do.

↓

Is that so—

...Huh, huh, huh? That-That means...

"Did he just ask me, whether, I like...anime, or something...?"[7D 18]

There was no assumption. That was what he basically asked.

"U~!!!!!!"

Feeling like she wanted to find a hole to hide in, Kanzashi again ran forward.

"Haa..."

It was a switched-off setting now. In the Middle School Student Council Office Section of Saint Marianne Academy.

Ran was dressed in the basic black uniform, and it was the 17th time she sighed today.

Though she was sitting in the Chairman's position, she sprawled her body on the table.

"What's wrong, Kaichou?"[7D 19]

"Why are you so lifeless? Today's the School Anniversary, you know?"

Some of Ran's classmates and friends from the Student Council surrounded her worriedly.

Ran spoke weakly as if her soul was coming out.

"The one I invited..."

"OOH! Who who who? Who did you get? What's his name!?"

"It's not that..."

"Then—what happened to the guy you invited?"

"He's late..."

Haa. She sighed again.

"Huh, what's wrong with that? Just wait."

"It's not that he's not coming, right?"

"That's true..."

"How long will he be late?"

"Two hours."

This means that they couldn't go on the shopping trip in the morning.

"Isn't it okay to go in the afternoon? There's still 3 hours left before the School Festival closes."

"Isn't that too short? A little longer, even till night. Maybe we can raise a campfire."

"Nope, that's impossible. The Festival Rules are part of the School Rules, they're really strict."

"Yeah..."

Haa...she sighed again.

It couldn't be helped, but Ran didn't give up as she opened her phone's mailbox again.

"Sorry. I'll be late due to school circumstances. Most likely, I'll be there at around 12."

(Uu, I thought we could go out in the morning...)

But if he arrived around 12, it would suit her, wouldn't it?

They'd be seen if they were to eat lunch with everyone on the rooftop.

(In that case, ehehe...there'll be rumors of him being my boyfriend. Just like that...)

Yay~ Just when Ran was lost in her thoughts, the phone again let out a *Bzzt* sound.

"Mail...? Ah!"

It's from Ichika-san! Ran forcefully swallowed her words before she said that out.

Ran never told anyone that she'd invited someone, no matter how close that person was. It's a secret amongst secrets.

(Wha-What's wrong? Will he be here earlier than expected?)

Her heart beating even faster, Ran pressed the phone, and the phone showed the content of the mail.

«Sorry, the investigation will last into the afternoon. About 2 hours later.»

...

"Huh?"

Unable to understand the situation, Ran instantly stopped thinking.

(What's this investigation...? And, he's going to be even later...)

And most glaringly were the words 'Two Hours'.

If the estimated time's changed from 12 to 2, there's only 1 hour to go out.

And if there's one hour left, it means they'll be starting to pack up.

Ran stared at the phone blankly, tears welling up in her eyes.

(Ichika-san, you...Ichika-san, you...)

GANK! She lifted her head up.

"IDDDDDIIIIIIIIOOOOOTTTTTT!!!"

"Haa...Haa...Haa..."

I ran full sprint from the station, and finally got to the entrance of Saint Marianne School.

It's now 2pm sharp.

I hurriedly pulled my phone out and called Ran.

Duruuu...*duruuu*...

(Huuh? She isn't picking up?)

That's strange. Though I wanted to hang up and see if I mistook it for the wrong person, the screen clearly showed the name 'Gotanda Ran'.

"..."

--Ah.

Just when I stepped through the entrance, I saw Ran sitting at the bench at the entrance below the [Maiden's Statue] in a lonely manner.

"Hey, Ran~, Heeey!!"

"..."

On hearing my voice, she lifted her head up.

--Humph.

"What?"

Ran turned around and walked away quickly.

"Hey, hey! Ran! What's with you!?"

Just when I wanted to chase after her, a female in nun habit came to stop me.

"Did you bring an invitational ticket along?"

"Ah, I did. Erm..."

I searched through my pockets.

I ran all the way here from IS Academy, so the stuff in my pockets were all crumpled. The nun looked at the invitational ticket and stared at me suspiciously.

She continued to look at me for 2 minutes with an expression like she was watching a suspect's expression.

"Then, welcome."

After getting the ticket back from the nun, I ran off to chase after Ran.

"Don't run in the school!"

"So-Sorry!"

The nun scolded me angrily.

Can't be helped then. I could only walk briskly to chase after her.

"This is hard..."

However, I could only see female students of Saint Marianne Academy dressed in black blazers in the School Festival, and lost Ran completely.

(And there's a strange look from just now...)

Looking around, I found many groups of threes, fours looking at me from afar.

(Ahh, am I treated as some sort of mystical beast here...)

Haa. I sighed. Now what do I do?

"Hey hey. Isn't that guy pretty good looking?"

"Yeah yeah! Just one guy?"

"But I think we've seen him before, right?"

"Ah! That person! Look! It's Orimura Ichika! Didn't he appear on TV before?"

"Huh!? Why—Why!?"

"He took someone's invitational ticket in, right? But there's only one."

"Let's-Let's go and talk to him..."

"Ah! He's walking over here!"

The noisy girls were raising a commotion. I felt somewhat nervous and approached the nearest group of girls.

"Well, if you excuse me?"

""""YES! ANYTHING WILL DO!""""

Their voices overlapped.

Wha-What's going on? What's with you people?

"Well, you're all from the same middle school, so do you know Gotanda Ran? She should be the Student Council President or something."

"Ye-Yes! We do!"

"Do you know where she is now? She didn't pick up my call."

"Wh-Who! Who knows?"

Well, normally speaking, that should be the typical response.

Can't be helped then. I'll check out where the Student Council office is and look over there.

"Well, if possible, can you follow us and sightsee the School Festival?"

"Huh?"

Jiii—

(What's wrong? Why do I feel that someone's glaring at me?)

It's not some girl's curious stare, but I do feel a powerful stare with intent aimed at the back of my head.

(Don't tell me...)

Suddenly, I formulated a plan and said loudly so that the person who was staring could hear me.

"YEAH! THE PERSON WHO INVITED ME DIDN'T SHOW UP! I'LL GO OUT WITH YOU PEOPLE THEN!"

"RE-REALLY!?"

The expressions of the trio of girls in front of me glowed radiantly...uu, I feel guilty.

"Ahhh~"

DADADADA—a girl came running over—it's Ran.

"I-ICHIKA-SAN! WHY DID YOU KEEP ME WAITING ! THEN, LET'S GO! THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME LEFT!"

Ran forcefully tugged at me and pulled me away from the group of girls. As expected, the one who was glaring at me was Ran.

For some reason, it seems that she was looking at me from the shadows.

I palmed my hands together to apologize to the girls.

"..."

Ran pulled my arm and walked away fast.

After I entered the school campus, she never stopped to break the silence.

"Ran. Hey—Heeyy..."

"..."

"Are you still angry about me being late? I'm sorry."

"It's nothing. It's not about that..."

I thought that she finally decided to speak up after much difficulty, but she pouted her face and started muttering.

On a side note, the programs and performances of IS Academy and Saint Marianne Academy, which are both all-girls schools, feel similar.

(But this school feels somewhat more historic compared to IS Academy with its brand new facilities.)

The windows are as tall as the church, and the sunlight shone in brightly.

The floor and walls are all a simple cream-color, giving off a stern feeling.

"Wa, Gotanda-san got a boyfriend!"

"So good—I'm so envious—"

"That super-strict Gotanda-san!"

The conversations of the girls I passed by entered my ears...haa, girls really like to talk about such things.

"Ah, there's takoyaki[7D 20]. Do you want some, Ran? My treat."

"...Crepes."

"Huh?"

"Crepes are better."

"Ohh, is that so? We'll go to the crepes shop then."

Maybe it's just me, but with everyone looking at us like that, Ran seemed to feel better.

"Speaking of which, Ran, it's about time to let your hand go."

"No, no!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Because...I-Ichika-san, you never looked like you wanted to reflect on being late!"

"No, that can't be helped—"

"Yo-You're not a guy if you don't reflect on it!"

Uu, that's really cruel.

"This-This is to make Ichika-san reflect on this."

As she said that, she let my hand go, and then held my wrist again.

Hm? Why must I reflect on this? That's weird.

"The-Then. Let's go."

Suddenly becoming really stiff, Ran's knees felt like Tin plate soldiers that couldn't bend their knees as she kicked her steps.

"..."

"Ran?"

"Ye-Yes!?"

"Why do I feel that you're forcing it?"

"That's not true!"

Really? That's suspicious.

"Hmm—then, let's check out the crepes shop."

"O-Okay!"

I don't know when Ran's mood improved completely as she smiled radiantly like the sun.

One hour before the School Festival ended, I got dragged around on the wrist by Ran.

"I'm really sorry, but our restaurant can't allow you to enter like this."

"...Huh?"

I'm at the restaurant on the highest level of the [Teresa] Hotel, and the slightly old waiter's blocking me outside.

"Huh, no, but...how do I get in?"

"Yes, please put on a suit or a tuxedo."

"No, I don't really have that..."

That's...not good, not good at all. Couldn't I enter with just a ticket? You should have explained it to me properly...Mayuzumi sisters...

"Dear customer, you can get one from the shops on level 3. How about you check it out?"

"Erm, if I may ask, how much is the cheapest suit?"

"Yes...about 100,000 yen."

Guaaa! That wasn't a fee a high school student could take.

Speaking of which, what happened to Houki? Seems like she couldn't go in too if she wasn't in a dress...

"What's wrong?"

A clear voice could be heard from behind me.

Just when I was about to ask what was going on, there was a woman in a dress behind me.

"This is...Miss Meusel."

The waiter bowed to her respectfully.

On a side note, this woman has flowing long hair, is extremely tall, huge breasts, a slender waist and a beautiful hip curve. She's really a beauty.

She's dressed beautifully in a purple dress, giving off an adult charm all over.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, this customer's attire doesn't match the dress code , so he's not allowed to enter."

"Can't he go in? That's pitiful."

"Even if you request it, Miss Meusel, I'm really sorry..."

"Fuu, can't be helped then."

This woman—Meusel-san scratched her chin and turned to me.

"Shall we go?"

"Huh? Where...are we going?"

"The suit shop. I'll get one for you."

"Huh...Huuh!? Ho-How-How can I do that?"

"I can. It's my interest to give young boys gifts."

What kind of interest is that?

Just when I thought about that, she suddenly grabbed my wrist.

"Hey, Mister, where's the suit shop?"

"Level 3."

"Thank you."

Huh? Huh? Huh?

"Er-Erm—"

"Fufu♪"

Before I could say anything, she moved off first to stop my movements.

This sudden development is like a sudden downpour.

...

.....

.....

"Ohh, it really suits you."

"Tha-Thank you..."

The extremely expensive suits were all lined up in the shop. I'm feeling nervous since it's my first time wearing a tuxedo.

(But, well, isn't this way too expensive...?)

I wanted to peek at the price tag, but Meusel-san spotted me.

However, it feels like there're 5 zeros on the price tag.

"Er-Erm— I still can't accept this."

"Are you still worried? What a cute kid."

"No, even though you gave this to me earnestly, there's no reason to help me out that much..."

"Ara, do I need a reason to help others?"

I got pressurized by the bewitching smile of Meusel-san, and became completely speechless.

"Huh, eeermm..."

--Not good. My heart's racing for some reason. *DOKI* *DOKI*

"Yes. If I really have to say the reason, it's to satisfy myself, I guess?"

"Satisfy...?"

"That's right, satisfaction. Satisfied that a penniless kid would take me. I can feel superior and honorable, right?"

Meusel-san blinked at me. It seemed that I never thought of this before.

It's just, basically, to help me when I'm in trouble, right ?

Whether it's grace or bust, this woman in front of me has them big. I'm somewhat moved.

(Is this the so-called 'beautiful woman'[7D 21]?)

Just when I thought about this, my heart pounded faster again.

"Ah, look. Your tie's all crooked."

After she said that, I wanted to adjust it myself, but Meusel-san was faster than me and reached out to straighten my tie.

"Tha-Thanks..."

"Yes. That'll be perfect. Then, next is—"

"Miss Meusel. The package you ordered has arrived."

"Ah, perfect timing."

Speaking of which, I suddenly remembered that she called someone when she entered the changing room.

And now, a florist with an apron walked into the shop.

As for why I knew he's a florist, it's because he's holding a bouquet of roses.

"Thank you. The bill will be charged to the same place."

"Yes. We look forward to your next order."

The shop attendant of the flower shop bowed respectfully and went back.

Meusel-san took a whiff off the bouquet of flowers, and nodded her head.

"Nice roses. Then, here you go."

"Huh?"

She handed me the bouquet of flowers.

There are about 20 roses, and I felt that it was somewhat heavy.

"Your partner for dinner, you kept her waiting, right? You can't be called a gentleman if you don't bring a few over."

"Is-Is that so..."

"Then, go to the restaurant. Don't keep the girl waiting. Girls can spend time on this world at twice the speed of guys."

"The-Then, I'll pay for the bouquet and the suit. Please tell me how to contact you."

I still can't accept that I didn't need to pay for this, and so I asked this for the fifth time.

But I saw Meusel-san maintain her smile, waving her hand and telling me 'No need, hurry up and go'.

(Uuu, what do I do now...)

Just when I was troubled, I glanced at the watch—WAIT, IT'S ALMOST PAST AN HOUR ALREADY!?"

"Than-Thank you very much! I'll go off first, so thank you very much!"

"I'll take your thanks then."

"Finally, just your name, or full name. Can you tell me ?"

Meusel-san smiled and told me her name.

"Squall. Squall Meusel."

Squall-san, is it? I'll definitely not forget about that.

"Thank you very much! And goodbye!"

"Yes. Goodbye, Orimura Ichika-kun."

I hurried to the restaurant, taking care not to let my suit crumple.

--Huh?

"Did-Did she just say my name...?"

Just when I was thinking about this, the elevator arrived.

Ah! Got to get to Houki fast!

"..."

At the most inner table of the restaurant, sitting at that place and looking down at the night scenery was a restless Houki.

The reason she was anxious is the clothing she's wearing now.

"Our shop requires females to wear dresses."

Having been told to do that, Houki could only borrow a dress from the shop. As expected of female superiority in today's society. Men would be told to go buy it, and women can borrow the dresses inside the shop.

(It-It's not too weird, right?)

Houki was wearing a white dress, and the luxury showed more of the refined lady's image.

The last time she wore a dress was while doing the Cinderella fight during the school festival.

During that time, she was so focused on the right to live with Ichika that she didn't realize that the light and fluffy thing called a *dress* wouldn't calm her heart down.

(As expected, the kimono's still the best.)

That high performance costume's Number 1 in the world, at least for me.

Just when Houki was thinking about this, a voice came from behind, calling her.

"Sorry for being late, Houki."

"You're too slow, Ichika! What were you—"

She wouldn't feel good if she didn't rant off. Just when Houki was about to stand up, turn around and throw a tantrum—the world suddenly stopped.

"Yo."

Dressed in a tuxedo, Ichika was standing there.

He was dressed completely in black, and the suave coolness around him was undoubted.

(So-So handsome.)

Houki wanted to complain, but those thoughts were gone like the wind.

Staring blankly at Ichika, Houki was handed a bouquet.

"Please accept this."

"Are these...roses...? And they're all red..."

She received the bouquet of flowers for the first time in her life (and the red ones the girls always dreamed of). At this moment, Houki seemed to see a huge dream as all sorts of confusing thoughts rushed into her head.

(Ichika was late, I was angry, unable to calm down. Ichika finally came and suddenly gave me roses.)

She was completely lost.

Blank, Houki just stood there. The waiter in the gentleman's attire came to talk to her, and she sat down.

"Then, welcome, and enjoy the special dinner of this restaurant."

The duo who were greeted respectfully greeted back half a moment later.

"Then, please allow us to serve the meal according to the menu. Since both of you are underaged, we can't provide alcohol or the likes, but we can provide mineral water for both of you."

Ichika and Houki were really tense, and they nodded their heads in agreement without knowing what was going on.

The explanation then continued for a while, and both of them were finally released from the waiter. They couldn't help but sigh.

" 'Saying that we came to the right place', that's just inappropriate."

"That's right. This isn't a restaurant we should be at."

Looking around at the other tables, it seemed that they were all adults. And they were more like adults of the upper class of society instead of being just normal adults.

(Speaking of which.)

Houki put the bouquet of flowers on the table, and turned to look at Ichika, who was dressed in the tuxedo.

Ichika now looks more mature than usual. Basically—that's right, it's great.

(Why? Why is this guy so suited to wear men's clothing...)

It was the same with the butler outfit during the school anniversary. Anyway, he's just very suited to formal clothing.

(Do-Do I look bad?)

She lowered her head to look at her dress.

As expected, anything other than the kimono couldn't calm her down. It didn't look like it suited her that well.

"..."

She was somewhat depressed.

"Houki."

Lowering her head subconsciously, Houki anxiously lifted her head up as Ichika called her.

"This dress—"

"!"

BKU! She curled up.

What if he says that it's weird? What if he says that it doesn't suit me? Thinking about this, her heart felt like it was going to leap out.

"Not bad. It suits you well."

"Ah..."

--*DOKI!*

Her heart pounded hard.

"Is-Is that so? That's good."

She acted like it was nothing and coughed.

But the heartbeat that was left in her chest felt like it was going to burst out, and Houki could feel her face turning red.

(The dim lights help me a lot.)

After this, dish after dish was served, and yet she didn't feel the taste.

Actually, it was unbelievable that the food could even go through the throat, as Houki's heart had been beating wildly because of Ichika in front of her.

"But this is really a top-class restaurant. Each dish's so delicious."

"Is-Is that so?"

--Huuh? Who'd know how they taste like? It's all because of you, Ichika!

Thinking about this, Houki stared at Ichika.

"Hn?"

"Su...!"

What's wrong? Facing Ichika's smiling face, Houki's ears got red.

Ichika's so handsome, so cool, I can't even look at him straight now.

(Now's the only chance! I'll confess!)

Overcome by the impulse of wanting to pass her feelings, she couldn't bring her courage out. Anxious, Houki tried to encourage herself as she picked the glass cup on the table and drank the contents.

"I-Ichika!"

"What is it?"

"I-I—"

A sudden surge of excitement and pressure caused blood to rush up to Houki's head.

Her heart felt like a damaged engine going overload. It was impossible to stop it.

(Say it! Say it!)

She clenched her fists until the fingers dug into her palms, and she didn't care even though it was hurting her.

"I, well, I—"

Like! Just when Houki was about to say it, she suddenly went limp.

"...Huuh?"

The world spun around her. *What's happening? What's going on?*—just like that, Houki's consciousness went out like a TV with the plug pulled out.

"Hey, Heey, Houki?"

Seeing Houki suddenly collapse on the chair, Ichika anxiously asked. But he couldn't do anything opposite the table, so he stood up and moved to Houki.

"Houki, what's wrong? Hey."

"Funya...Ihikaa..."

"Wah! What's wrong? Why do you reek of alcohol!?"

"Heh...what's going on..."

Her speech slurred, Houki swayed and leaped at Ichika.

"I'll teach you. I'll teach you!"

"Uwa! Idiot, stop it! Hey, stop hitting!"

"Nyahahahaha..."

Seeing this somewhat strange scene, the waiter hurriedly came over.

"Dear customer, what happened?"

"No, I'm not too sure. She became like this after drinking water."

"Water? Excuse me?"

The waiter took the empty cup and sniffed inside.

"Who-WHO SERVED WINE TO THIS CUSTOMER!"

"Wine?"

"Syake—"[7D 22]

"It-It was me!"

"YOU AGAIN! HOW MANY TIMES DID I TELL YOU NOT TO MESS THE ORDER!?"

The young man lowered his head and bowed as he faced the lecturing waiter. Houki was completely drunk, and Ichika just sighed.

It's like a dream.

I'm waiting for a certain someone in the wide flower field.

A precious someone.

No, I knew who I was waiting for—a prince.

"—"

Someone called my name.

And I answered.

"Come up."

The Prince lifted my arm and guided me onto the horse.

I was carried by the Prince in front of his chest, and my chest felt like it was playing a tune.

"Shall we go?"

To where? I didn't ask.

Anywhere. To the ends of the world.

Anywhere will do as long as I'm with you.

"..."

I held onto the Prince tightly.

The warm, existent heartbeat was pure, undiluted happiness .

"Houki."

Gyaahh, the wind blew.

"Fufufufuufu..."

GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!

"GUEEEEH! HOUKI, STOP IT! MY NECK'S ABOUT TO BREAK!...GUUEE!!"

Carrying the completely drunk Houki, I walked all the way back to IS Academy.

I'll return the dress next time. I told the restaurant staff, and came out. However, it's still a heavy journey.

(Besides, I'm in a tuxedo. And Houki's in a dress...)

It can't be helped if someone asks us which party did we come back from.

And Houki continued to smile as she slept, and the surrounding eyes would look at us.

"Haa...a lot of things sure happened today. I'm so tired. .."

But never mind. It's not like I felt any worse.

(Houki looks beautiful in a dress.)

Considering that she's leaning on my back and sleeping, Houki let out stable breathing.

My childhood friend, who gave a completely refreshing charm after changing clothes, really looks cute to my somewhat biased eyes.

"...Ichika..."

"Hm? Are you awake?"

"Uu."

Nope. She's still drunk. Speaking of which, maybe she's all dizzy now.

"Anyonya."[7D 23]

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"Funi."

"Do you want some water?"

"...Syuki."[7D 24]

Hn? What do I need to take note of?[7D 25]

"Houki."

"...Suu..."

Ahh, she fell asleep again.

Really, you.

...

.....

.....

"Then, Takatsuki-san. I'll leave her to you."

Finally making my way to the first year dorm of IS Academy, I brought Houki to her room and left her with her roommate.

Most likely, there'll be gossip of me carrying Houki back. I tried my best to avoid a few people, but some girls caught me.

Thinking about this, as I walked out, I met Chifuyu-nee.

"What's the matter, Orimura? Why are you dressed like this?"

"Erm, I went to watch a musical."

PAK! My brain got smashed by the karate chop.

"Oww!"

"Who are you trying to fool?"

How does she know?

(Huh, more than that. Isn't there something I need to ask?)

Luckily, there's no one else on the corridor.

I walked to Chifuyu-nee and asked sternly.

"Chifuyu-nee."

"Call me Orimura-sensei."

"Erm...it's about family..."

It's hard to say it out.

Having been abandoned by our parents, we siblings have always treated family matters as taboo.

But even so, I had to ask.

"Well, is there anyone else...in the family...other than us...?"

"..."

Chifuyu-nee's expression changed.

I got overwhelmed by the suffocating tension.

"Like, an imouto, or something..."

"Nope."

"No? But..."

--Someone who looked just like Chifuyu-nee existed.

"You are my only family."

"Bu—"

Seeing that I intended to inquire until the end, Chifuyu-nee walked away with large strides.

That back figure of hers indicated that this is the end of the conversation.

"..."

I'm unable to understand at all, and I remained rooted to the spot even after Chifuyu-nee escaped my vision.

Epilogue: The Beautiful Night Under the Moon

Inside the room that was swallowed in darkness, only the light from the monitor could be seen.

The things that were shown by the light were numerous machines with unknown functions. This scene looked just like some Middle Age witch's ritual.

"Fu—mu...the system's efficiency finally improved."

The owner of the room continued to mutter to herself as she looked at the display screen.

The face that roughly appeared in this room belonged to Shinonono Tabane.

"Even so, [Golem III]'s complete destruction was really unexpected."

Humming along as she said that, she continued to play with the IS core.

That's right. An IS core that hadn't been introduced—in other words, the new cores were all created by Tabane. That was because no one other than her could create them.

"Well, ISes need humans to pilot them to trigger their maximum abilities. It can't be helped that an unmanned suit's ability is inferior."

Unmanned IS technology. This belongs to Tabane—only Tabane has this technology.

It'd be a bad thing if this technology was revealed to the world.

Nobody knew how much this action could be limited.

"But you got stronger, Houki-chan. Just like that time."

Confirming that she received the data of the battle between Houki and [Golem III], Tabane smiled happily.

In order to attain Houki's personal data and update the battle capabilities of [Akatsubaki], she sent an unmanned suit to attack.

Tabane caused so much damage just to get Houki's personal data.

"But that's really unexpected."

Tabane thought that Chifuyu would launch as she sent in so many ummanned suits.

The first generation Japanese IS [Kurazakura] that earned Chifuyu the first title of [Brunhilde]; Tabane didn't know where it went, but she felt that Chifuyu still had it.

"Mn—..."

Tabane tilted her head and placed her hand at her chin .

Those eyes were looking at the sea of thoughts.

"Ahh, don't tell me—"

Tabane didn't think that this was something big at the beginning, but on thinking about this carefully, it made sense.

"Is it, is it? Is it there? Fufu."

Like a kid that just thought of a new prank, the naive face had ill intent in it.

Just when Tabane was making a ruckus like this, someone walked into the room.

She was short and skinny, and 12 years old, or that was the impression she gave.

The one thing people were really mindful of was the flowing silver hair and the braiding of the long hair down to waist level.

As for why the hair was braided, it was because Tabane had braided it.

To the girl, Tabane was more important than anything in the world. Her savior or rescuer, these things couldn't describe her fully. She swore eternal allegiance to Tabane the day she met Tabane.

"Tabane-sama."

"Yaa yaa, Ku-chan. What's wrong?"

"The bread's burnt."

More than half of it was burnt, but Tabane's eyes were glowing.

"Mn—a—ma—zi—ng—"

"You're lying. It's definitely not nice."

To be honest, the girl didn't want to serve Tabane such lousy food.

But she followed Tabane's words that 'Girls must be able to make a dish', and continued to make, but just ended up making carbon and gluey stuff.

Even so, Tabane didn't look irritated, but continued to eat on and on.

And when Tabane said that it was really good, it made the girl feel even more guilty than happy.

"..."

"Hey, Ku-chan."

The girl that was called lifted her head.

Her eyes were always shut ever since she entered the house.

But by using the girl's unique characteristics, it didn't matter whether she could see or not.

"Well, this is a presumptuous request, you know?"

"What is it?"

"Mu—that's too serious, too serious—. Ku-chan, just call Tabane-san mama, okay?"

—She had only one sister.

So when Tabane adopted the girl, she decided to treat her as her daughter.

"Then, what is it that you want to tell me?"

"Mn, I want you to deliver something for me."

"Yes, the location?"

Watching the girl who asked, Tabane answered with a smile,

"IS Academy, in the Special Area underground—"

Afterwords

It's been a while since I last went home. Hello. This is Yumizuru.

After writing the 7th volume, I understood something.

That is, 'humans won't be crushed so easily'.

However, it'll be really troublesome if one's crushed and unable to recover.

Speaking of which, Ichika's really amazing. He was nearly killed, and still remained positive like that. If that guy's not some once-in-a-lifetime great, he's a fool without a limit. Oh yeah, Laura started to fawn too. Yack Deculture (TN : Macross Frontier saying. Means 'so amazing'.)

K-shi, the editor. I'm sorry for causing you lots of trouble up till now. You helped me out a lot this time. I'm really grateful.

On the production side, I-producer, I'm really sorry for saying a lot of nonsense to you on the phone. But it's been a great help that you were willing to hear my complaints. I'm really grateful to you.

Chief editor Misaka, I'm sorry for being overdue. I'm really, really sorry.

I'm sorry to keep the readers waiting. Though I wanted it to catch up like Ichika in volume 6, I was unable to do it.

Okiura-sensei, I'm sorry for handing in the design specifications so late. Also, the design of this new IS [Uchigane Nishiki]'s brilliant. But it's not right to put every picture of Kanzashi as 'Tatenashi Kanzashi', right? It's Sarashiki Kanzashi. Also, Tatenashi's actual name was clearly shown. So well—

Akaboshi-sensei and Kon-sensei's mangas are interesting. Can you continue to serialize my manga? Eh, no?

And to improve my writing speed, even when I have to head to a family restaurant to write during midnight, there would be insiders accompanying me. I'm really grateful.

But this is just the 7th volume. Though I wrote for so long, it's just the 7th volume…see, this is the anxiety over being chased by other popular works. Should I retreat to the mountains…

Speaking of which, it's thanks to everyone that the anime was highly rated, and I'm really grateful for that.

If you don't mind, please buy the DVD/BD of the anime. Each volume's really well done.

Also, can everyone listen to the IS radio show? It's very interesting every time Hisaka Youko and Shimoda Asami-san are on. While this is being sold, my guest-starring in the recording should be over. That was nerve-wrecking.

Then, the 8th volume will finally reveal the mysterious veil of Chifuyu.

In this gradually intense battle, what the imprisoned princess dreamt of is—

Next volume will be [Black Key Chapter/ World's Purge]. We'll meet again then. Goodbye!

Translation Notes and References

Chapter 1

1. ↑ Other katakana given was ヴ , which would mean Wodan Auge. Heads up to the anon who pointed that out.
2. ↑ Chawanmushi, 茶.
3. ↑ It means taking the lead
4. ↑ **Jii** is a 'sound effect' normally used to refer to staring at something. The fact that the girls said it out loud was probably because they wished to let the two know they were being watched.
5. ↑ Sanjo, 惨
6. ↑ See Gyokuro for more details.
7. ↑ **Imouto** means *little sister*. But that sounds a little too long, and in order to preserve the Japanese feel in the LN, it's left as it is.
8. ↑ The sentence here is normally used when an older sibling bequeaths/entrusts his/her younger sister to the person he/she is talking to. In the case of it being a romantic interest or a guy it can imply bequeathing/entrusting for marriage. Hence Ichika's reaction.
9. ↑ See Cadre for more details

10. ↑ **nee-san** is one of the terms used for an elder sister . However there are so many such terms, each emphasizing different levels of respect and love, that it can't be properly expressed by their equivalent English terms. Hence it has been left this way.
11. ↑ Hakama are traditional Japanese clothes for the lower body.
12. ↑ の. A rough translation for it will be 'whatever/ anyhow'.
13. ↑ **S**tudent **H**ome **R**oom
14. ↑ In Chinese: 走. Basically, it means that if it becomes obvious that your current course of action will lead to defeat, then retreat and regroup. When your side is losing, there are only three choices remaining: surrender, compromise, or escape. Surrender is complete defeat, compromise is half defeat, but escape is not defeat. As long as you are not defeated, you still have a chance.
15. ↑ Ichika's nickname for his elder sister Chifuyu when she acts tyrannical. Guan Yu was a Chinese historical figure during the time of the Three Kingdoms.
16. ↑ Yakisoba are Japanese fried noodles.
17. ↑ A Bento is a Japanese boxed lunch.

18. ↑ "Ohime-sama dakko" also known as the "Princess Cradle" or "Being carried like a princess" is a recurring action in anime, manga and light novels that occurs between love interests in which one party carries the other in his/her arms. It is considered a high level move and the fantasy/desire of all girls out there. English equivalent is the Bridal Carry.

Chapter 2

1. ↑ 打, Uchigane Second
2. ↑ This is not a misprint. DAN as in Dan Gotanda, Ichika's friend and older brother of Ran Gotanda.
3. ↑ Taichou means captain.
4. ↑ Original gave it as イ, and it's actually more of a Japanese slang.
5. ↑ Shinyouju no Mori, 針
6. ↑ English equivalent would be "Oh my, what's this? "
7. ↑ Ojou-sama is the term used for high class ladies, thus Ojou-sama school is a school for high class girls

Chapter 3

1. ↑ See Iaido for more details.

2. ↑ **The** Sengoku Era ,also known as **The Warring States Period** was a time of social upheaval, political intrigue, and nearly constant military conflict in Japanese history that lasted roughly from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century.
3. ↑ See Kakiage for more details.
4. ↑ otoshite, 落
5. ↑ 落, otosutsute
6. ↑ Also known as Golgotha, the place of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Ichika's going to die for our sins. ..
7. ↑ That's actually how it was really written, ie: Deliberate distortion.
8. ↑ 剣, kenshi
9. ↑ ハ, meaning High Touch, is a variation of a High Five where the participants clap hands in the general region above their heads. (ie: They will be standing close to each other, or they may even do it the moment they pass each other while walking or running, with one hand each stretched to the general region above their heads and letting them clap with each other's. Thus the term **High *Touch***.) Example
10. ↑ English equivalent being, "Oh dear", "Jeez", etc.

Chapter 4

1. ↑ A Daruma is a hollow, round, Japanese traditional doll modeled after Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen sect of Buddhism. Is usually considered as a toy .
2. ↑ **Oni** is a Japanese demon and **baba** refers to an old lady or grandma, thus **oni-baba** means demon granny or similar.
3. ↑ 博. Gambler.
4. ↑ For those who don't understand, I'm guessing the wager is Meal Vouchers. (ie: It's not the Meal Vouchers which are fighting.)
5. ↑ Ahaha, Ichika's in shock.
6. ↑ Oni roughly translates to Demon and Akuma roughly translates to Devil.
7. ↑ The whole thing is a name itself, I didn't come up with this. Katakana given as サ "
8. ↑ 春, Spring Thunder.
9. ↑ 夢, yumeustsutsu
10. ↑ 蒼 , Souryuusen
11. ↑ ミ, most likely, a reference to 'Project ARMS' White Knight, piloted by Hayato Shingu, wich is in turn a reference to a Norse Myth about the only weapon, a mystle lance, that could kill Baldr the Immortal.

12. ↑ 山, Yamaarashi
13. ↑ 穿, Ugachi
14. ↑ See: Daihinmin for more details.
15. ↑ Shogi is a Japanese 2-person board game similar to chess (It is also knows as Japanese Chess)
16. ↑ See: Kendama for more details
17. ↑ Only the Japanese word for "love" is used. Japanese language is known for it's conciseness, a single word can carry the meaning of a whole sentence but this also sets the ground for some hilarious misunderstandings, as it is the case here. For the reader's benefit (so that they may get a hint as to what's going on) the "YOU" has been bracketed and added. Read on to get the whole picture as to what just happened.
18. ↑ Yup, that's right folks. The natural airhead strikes again! On another note, you'd think someone who likes watching anime would have realized what happened before this.
19. ↑ Kaichou is the Japanese term/title for President.
20. ↑ Takoyaki is fried or grilled Octopus.
21. ↑ い; can also be translated as really good woman in all aspects
22. ↑ Slurred way of saying "Sake".
23. ↑ Should be a slurred way of saying anata (you), or something like that.

24. ↑ Slurred way of saying "suki" [like].
25. ↑ 手, ; "syuki", basically means note.